

The Meaning Making Binarism: A Structuralist Approach to Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea

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Abstract

Binary oppositions are fundamental to structuralist thought which enjoyed a wide application in different fields of life. One of the most important fields is literary language since this language is the most intricate means of conveying meanings (literary meanings). Within a single text, meaning is expressed only rationally, and structuralists and semioticians look for certain internal structures asking what the categories are within which meaning is expressed and how they are organized. Moving beyond the level of sentences to larger units of speech and writing, structuralism identifies the underlying structures shared by the individual surface manifestations of a system. The reader, due to this structuralist orientation, can detect certain binary pairs in order to unravel the possible meaning of literary texts. This discovery of the binary oppositions is one of the central strategies of reading and interpretation. Thus binary oppositions are signs (codes) to be unraveled (decoded). This strategy of discovering binary oppositions in texts is crucial to detect the symbolic quality of certain texts. Symbols can be organized into pairs and sets. Thus, as applied to literature, structuralism is the study of underlying patterns and directions implied by the way language is used in a given literary text. It provides not only a theory but also a mode of practical criticism.

The above challenging meaning-finding strategy can be followed in the process of reading Earnest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, for this Nobel-winning piece evinces so many hidden meanings that can be fathomed scrutinizing the surface structure.

Part One: Theoretical

Binary oppositions are fundamental to structuralist thought which enjoyed a wide application in different fields of life. One of the most important fields is language since language is the most intricate means of conveying meanings (literary meanings) because literature can not exist beyond language.

Structuralist linguistics started out as an explanation of phonology. Sounds, like those represented by the letters of the alphabet, have no meaning in themselves. They acquire meaning only when they are joint together in chains of "correlation". Structuralist theory maintains that what we distinguish are not the sounds (phonemes) as such, but the distinctive features which underlie these sounds, such distinctions as vowel/consonant, compact high-energy sound/ diffuse low-energy sound. These distinctions are, in effect, "sound-order data," "relations between relations". (Robey, 1973: 47)

This predilection for dichotomies, for the interpretation of linguistic facts in binary terms, is clearly apparent in many aspects Jakobson's work. What is typical of Jakobson's theory is the binary character of the distinctive features. The distinctive feature is an opposite element. (Lepschy, 1972: 96) It is characterized by the presence or absence of a given quality. Jakobson stressed the importance of the phonological correlations as "a separate class of meaningful differences. Phonological correlation is made up of a series of binary oppositions

defined by a common principle which can be conceived independently of each pair of opposed terms.¹

Within a single text, meaning is expressed only rationally, and structuralists and semioticians look for certain internal structures asking what the categories are within which meaning is expressed and how they are organized. Moving beyond the level of sentences to larger units of speech and writing, structuralism identifies the underlying structures shared by the individual surface manifestations of a system.

As far as Saussure is concerned, meaning is relational. Saussure imagined that his work could provide a basis for a larger study of phonology. Having understood language as a process of signification in which words (signifiers) arbitrarily refer to things (signifieds) – the two in combination forming a sign, Saussure imagined the possibility of studying many different sign systems (symbolic rites, military signals, for examples). He coined the term semiology to designate the science of signs (from the Greek *sēmeîon*, meaning "sign" which would show "what constitutes signs, what laws govern them". (Lefkowitz, 1987: 61-63) ² The science of signs has developed principally into the study of codes, of the manner in which information is organized so that communities achieve consensus about meaning. Thus binary oppositions are signs (codes) to be unraveled (decoded).

Binary oppositions are not only apparent in language but they are fundamental to human thought in general. This is clear in the natural order. Examples of binary oppositions can be drawn as the following:

Masculine	/ Feminine
Night	/ Day
Black	/ White
Open	/ Closed
High	/ Low

The first two binary oppositions are parts of the natural order while the rest accumulate cultural connotations. However, feminists have argued that the first is also cultural, since certain attributes pertaining these (masculine = strong : feminine = submissive etc.) are culturally determined and they are variable. A similar argument applies to the second pair since it takes on a wide range of cultural meanings (night = evil, demonic : day = good, apocalyptic etc.) and thereby the pair becomes a set of signs.

Forms of binarism or dualism date back to the earliest times. Binarisms like God and Man, eternal and temporal, subject and object are among the fundamentals of the world-views. The concepts of "privatives" is pertinent in this respect. The world can be described in terms of the absence of certain qualities. Darkness is an absence of light, a thing is cold when it lacks heat or still when it lacks movement, or, as certain feminists define woman as lacking certain male features (notable the penis).

This intrinsic binary quality of human consciousness was mainly exploited by Levi-Strauss in his application of structuralists ideas to social anthropology.³ Levi-Strauss' selection of culturally significant binary oppositions, the equivalents to vowel / consonant in phonology, often seem rather arbitrary but they fit with ethnographic data. Here are some of them:

1. Left hand versus right hand. Every one is aware of the difference between his left hand and his right one, though he can not state precisely what the difference is; one hand is, in fact, a complex topological transformation of the other. The hands are alike in being hands but different in being left and right. This puts forward the useful basis for metaphor:

left = sinister, evil, demonic, clumsy, mysterious as opposed to right = correct, good, apocalyptic. Structuralism caters us with clues as to why this should be so.

2. Raw versus cooked. Human beings characteristically eat part of their food cooked. Man has distinguished himself in the use of fire for cooking. Levi-Strauss argues that raw versus cooked is a universal metaphor for nature versus culture. The opposition wild versus tame is similar.
3. Spatial oppositions. Structuralists find significance in such binary pairs as earth / sky; earth / underground; this side of... / the other side of... ; land / sea; dry / wet; the city / the desert; In this respect, there are pairs of metaphoric connotations as the religious connotation of life / death which can be derived from this world / the other world and Man versus God.
4. Sister versus wife as the sister can never be a wife. Then we have the validity of this social dyad.

In his Structuralist Poetics, Jonathan Culler discusses the possibility of discovering the binary pairs in texts, and focuses on the reader's contribution in this context (the reader response approach to literature). (Selden, 1989: 56) The reader, due to this structuralist orientation, can detect certain binary pairs in order to unravel the possible meaning of literary texts; this reminds us of Riffaterre's claim that the literary phenomenon is a dialectic between text and reader. This discovery of the binary oppositions is one of the central strategies of reading and interpretation. Appearance and reality, heaven and earth, court and town, country and city, body and soul, reason and feeling, high and low are few pairs employed in the interpretive strategies. Furthermore, certain binary oppositions are capable of generalizing a whole series of associated oppositions within a text: organic and mechanical (D.H. Lawrence), biological nature and divine nature (Shakespeare), and fancy and judgment (Alexander Pope).

This strategy of discovering binary oppositions in texts is crucial to detect the symbolic quality of certain texts. Symbols can be organized into pairs and sets. Thus, as applied to literature, structuralism is the study of underlying patterns and directions implied by the way language is used in a given literary text. It provides not only a theory but also a mode of practical criticism.

Part Two: Practical

In Death in the Afternoon, Hemingway uses an effective metaphor to describe the kind of prose he writes. He explains that

... if a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, he will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of the movement of an iceberg is due only to one eighth of it being above water. (Cited in Burhans, Jr., 1957: 72)

This metaphor is telling about the nature of Hemingway's works, especially his *The Old Man and the Sea*. Despite its apparent simplicity, this short novel abounds in the inner literary and aesthetic meanings below the clear-cut surface descriptions. The whole meaning of the work can be arrived at by detecting the main binary oppositions and their basic associations.

Hemingway's theme, expressed in the apparently simple, yet actually intricately designed plot of Santiago's adventure with the marlin and sharks, is man's capacity to withstand and transcend hardships of time and circumstance. Hemingway depicts, in circumstantial detail, elements of tests of endurance (physical struggle, fatigue, solitude, old

age, impending death) to which Santiago is subjected, and also his courageous response, summoning both physical energy and imaginative vision to counter the forces testing him.

The novel begins when Santiago is suffering from a cast-down state. This state of the protagonist is clear in the first paragraph. We are told that Santiago is old (with all the reverberations of old age: weakness, the need for help, lack of hope, impending death) and alone (solitude) and that he "had gone eighty-four days ... without taking a fish". (P. 5)⁴ The first sentence of the novel starts the long series of the binary oppositions. Santiago, now, is without the help of the boy, Manolin, because the boy's parents forced him to go with a lucky boat, for Santiago is described as "salao which is the worst form of unlucky". (Ibid) His skiff is always empty (versus the needed fullness of the catch) and the "sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat". (Ibid) (versus the needed victory which is going to be realized during and after Santiago's ordeal).

From the first paragraph, it is clear that we have the absence of many needed things: absence of strength, luck, youth, company, catch, etc.; This absence has resulted into weakness, unluck, solitude, the dearth of catch – with its ramification of physical nourishment etc. . Santiago's ordeal and real test is to out-weigh this cast-down state in order to enjoy its opposite.

Full of resolution and hope, for hope is his basic conviction, even he considers it a sin not to hope, Santiago begins his voyage on the eighty-fifth day. During this voyage, we can detect the basic elements of Santiago's cast-down state, the elements that push him forward (not thwart him) in order to do something heroic. Immediately after the beginning of the voyage, Santiago realizes his dilemma of loneliness, old age, lack of strength and his defeat. The only remaining thing is his hope and resolution, for he describes himself as a "strange old man". (P. 10)

During the voyage, Santiago finds himself in the lap of nature which is loved and admired by him, and away from the city (city versus nature). Santiago favours to be here (in nature) rather than enjoying the culturally organized life of the city – this is clear in Santiago's skiff and equipments which are simple in opposition to the rest of the fishermen's sophisticated equipments. In this natural atmosphere, Santiago realizes the natural and inevitable continuum of pursuing and being pursued, hunting and being hunted: The dolphin pursues and catches the flying fish and is, in turn, caught by the old man, who is nourished by the victim fish so that he can catch a bigger fish. The victor is in his turn victimized by big fish, sharks, while sharks in their turn are destroyed by man for man's advantage (the reference to the shark factory and to the fishermen's drinking shark liver oil for medicinal purposes. First Santiago is victor over the marlin, then he suffers the marlin's mutilation (defeat) as the sharks strip away its flesh. Santiago realizes this as the first shark threatens to turn his victory into defeat, "everything kills everything else some way". (P. 73)

The test of Santiago is great and it needs heroic features of great, young, strong and courageous personalities. Santiago relies on his own resources to cater for the lacking things during the ordeal with the marlin and its consequent effect (the ordeal with the sharks). The main force which pushes him forward is his will and resolution (hope). Now he suffers from the physical weakness at a time when the physical strength is needed. He caters for the lacking strength by his tricks (experience which makes him different from the rest of the fishermen). There are four main symbolic forces which sustain Santiago during the ordeal. These are the recollection of past and glorious experiences, viz., the boy (Manolin), the lions, DiMaggio (the baseball player) and the negro from Cienfuegos. All these recollections and

references stand for the things that are absent from Santiago. Santiago wants to win through enjoying the favoured qualities of the references to his previous and glorious self:

Santiago at present: absence of the favoured qualities of youth, strength, sustenance and etc. .

versus

The favoured qualities of the past which are found in Manolin, the lions, DiMaggio, and the negro.

The relationship between Santiago and Manolin is memorable and of a special kind. It has the meaning of a "symbolic doubling". (Baker,1957:27) Beside this symbolic doubling, there is the dramatic function of Manolin. Manolin succeeds to heighten our sympathy with Santiago. Manolin provides Santiago with food (physical sustenance) and we watch the old man through the admiring and pitying eyes of the boy. After the ordeal with the sharks, Manolin brings the exhausted Santiago, beside food, ointment for his injured hands commiserating on the loss (of the marlin) and planning for the future when they will work side by side again. This love of Manolin for Santiago is that of a disciple for master in the art of fishing. It is also the love of a son for an adopted father.

But from Santiago's point of view the relationship runs deeper. He has known Manolin for years, from the years of childhood up to the time when Manolin stands strong and lucky and confident (versus Santiago) on the edge of manhood. Like other aging men, Santiago finds something reassuring about the overlay of the past upon the present (past versus the present of Santiago). Through the agency of Manolin he is able to recapture in his imagination (the actual versus the symbolic presence of the boy) a similar strength and confidence which distinguished his own young manhood as a fisherman, earning him the title of el campeón (which reminds us of Santiago's experience with the negro).

During the old man's ordeal, the two phrases, "I wish the boy was here," and "I wish I had the boy," play across Santiago's mind often enough to deserve special attention. Santiago means exactly the invocation; the presence of the boy (abstract and concrete) would be a help in a time of crisis (the absence of the boy). And he invokes by means of these phrases the strength and courage of his youth that are absent from him now. Soon after he has hooked the marlin and knows that he must hang onto the line for some time (the need for physical strength which is absent now), Santiago says, "I wish I had the boy". Immediately his resolution tightens. The mere mention of the boy is a kind of talisman, even he connects the boy with salt in what amounts to be a metaphor: "I wish the boy were here and that I have some salt,"(P. 76) because the raw fish sickens him: he eats the fish to get strong and later on he says aloud, "I wish the boy was here-"(P. 49) and promptly settles himself against the planks of the bow for another period of endurance. So when there is no boy there is the lack of everything. But the metaphoric presence of the boy results into the physical strength of Santiago through resolution and eating – again physical strength which comes out of the abstract sustenance of Manolin.

Manolin is needed also when Santiago feels the 'betrayal' of his left hand (the cramp). Santiago's left hand (versus his right one) is aligned with the destructive forces. While he wills to unknot the cramp, he thinks that "if the boy was here," (P. 73) a little massaging would loosen the muscles of the forearm and help him when the marlin breaches soon after that.

While the marlin leaps again and again, and while the old man and his line are both strained and stretched almost to the breaking point, Santiago triples the refrain: "If the boy was here he would wet the coils of the line If the boy were here. If the boy were here".

(P. 79) Once again the effect of such an invocation is nearly magical as if, by means of it, some of the strength of the youth flowed in to sustain the limited powers of old age. Always, just after he has said the words, Santiago manages to reach down into the well of his courage for one more dipperful:

Santiago: old age, debility, lack of power and hope,

Versus

Manolin: youth, ability, power, hope,

Santiago feels the absence of the qualities of Manolin. That is why he enjoys them by recalling the boy and the things associated with him.

Hemingway, early, establishes a clear symbolic connection between the boy and the lions: "When I was your age," Santiago says addressing Manolin, "I was before the mast on a square-rigged ship that ran to Africa and I have seen lions on the beaches in the evening". (P. 17) Manolin's answer, "I know. You told me," (Ibid) indicates that this reference to such past experiences (youthful, charming, the opposite of Santiago's state during the ordeal) is a pleasant obsession in Santiago's mind, pleasant because it has its pleasant results in the present time (the time in which Santiago needs the attributes of such glorious and youthful experiences).

The night before the ordeal, after the boy has left him to sleep, Santiago dreams of the lions:

He was asleep in a short time and he dreamed of the lions of Africa when he was a boy and the long golden beaches and the white beaches, so white they hurt your eyes ... he smelled the smell of Africa that the land breeze brought at morning. (P. 19)

This dream of the scene of Africa in which he had seen the lions has its magical power on Santiago. The old man, through the dream, can recapture in the present time things (symbolically present in the lion imagery) that are absent. It is noteworthy that Santiago dreams of the lions that play "like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy". (P. 20) Here we have

the associations of the lion imagery

versus

Santiago

Santiago longs to be filled up with all the associations of the lion imagery. That is why the dream of the lions has the strengthening power which tightens his resolution and hope – things he needs in order to go on. Whenever he feels the sapping resolution (and physical power) in him he longs for the things that fill him with the lacking attributes. Santiago is always supported by the memory of his youth. In this respect, The Old Man and the Sea can be seen as parable of youth and old age.

During the ordeal of Santiago's struggle with the marlin and then against the sharks, the old man thinks repeatedly of DiMaaggio, the baseball player, wondering whether or not DiMaggio would approve of the way in which he has fished and endured. The DiMaggio of Santiago's reveries is, first of all, a man with a painful ailment, a bone spur; he is, in other words, a man who performs well against the handicap of pain and it is this that makes the difference (as the power to endure suffering), and Santiago finds this power in himself and, when lacking, in other men. He, because now is suffering from the sapping elements of endurance, fumbles in his inner self for courage and power. And DiMaggio, symbolically, stands for the absent or sapping power. After all, for Santiago, pain becomes literally the means of distinguishing reality from unreality:

He had only to look at his hands and feel his back against the stern to know that this [the ordeal with the marlin and the sharks] had truly happened and was not a dream. (P. 88; added square brackets)

Sometimes, the unreality is so important for Santiago, for through the dreams and reveries or the special reference to the past and glorious experiences, Santiago can attain endurance:

Absence of references to past: lack of hope, power, etc..

Versus

Presence of such references: realization of hope, power, etc..

Among these references, there is also the reference to the incidence of hand-wrestling with the negro from Cienfuegos that won Santiago the title of El Campion. Because the potentialities of that title are absent, that is why Santiago wants to boost himself through the past experiences.

Santiago needs all the things which help him to conquer the state of being unlucky. So the symbolic references and thinking of the boy, lions, DiMaggio and the negro regain in the old man his older self – the state he needs:

Absence of symbolic references = defeat

Versus versus

Presence of such references = victory

Santiago feels defeat in the present time and because of the presence of certain seeds of hope and resolution, "strange old man," Santiago can attain victory.

The immediate victory is catching the marlin. The marlin comes at a time when Santiago suffers from the dearth of victory (defeat versus victory). It stands symbolically for the brighter side in Santiago's present experience (the dark side: the lack of victory versus the bright side: the realization of victory). It represents all the past glory of Santiago, for all the favourable qualities that Santiago longs for, the qualities of courage, power, endurance, nobility (of its fight), experience, beauty, etc.:

Santiago at present: lack of the favourable qualities

Versus

The marlin: symbol of such qualities

That is why Santiago loves the marlin as his brother (because he finds the realization of his past glory through the marlin), yet he feels the necessity to kill it. The old man and the marlin, as brothers in this world, are inextricably joined by the necessity of killing and being killed (man versus nature). Since Santiago has to kill the fish, the marlin paradoxically becomes his foe (friend brother versus foe): "It is good that we do not have to try to kill the sun or the moon or the stars. It is enough to live on the sea and kill our true brothers." (P.66) Even, sometimes, the marlin is identified with Christ, for the qualities Santiago values most are found in the marlin and these link the marlin with Christ. They are the qualities which redeem life from meaninglessness and futility (meaningful life versus futility) and they are the qualities that Santiago wishes to confirm in himself. Paradoxically, the only means he has to confirm them in himself is by exercising them in opposition to the fish. He must, symbolically, slay the lord of life in order to achieve a spiritual identity with him. Thus, we have, in this story, the destruction of life and (versus) the redemption of life, affirmation and guilt. (Wells, 1957: 60)

Santiago does not only identify himself with the marlin, but with the mako shark and the turtle with its lasting heart; these creatures transcend defeat by displaying intense life at the moment of death. Santiago likes the qualities displayed by these creatures and he longs for

the presence of these qualities in himself, for their absence is fatal for him in his fight with the marlin and the sharks; as if Santiago, himself, shows the intense life at the moments when he faces the immanent death. Thus he aligns himself with these creatures in opposition to the opposing forces, viz., the shark for its magnanimous attack of the marlin:

But you enjoyed killing the dentuso he thought. He lives on the live fish as you do. He is not a scavenger nor just a moving appetite as some sharks are. He is beautiful and noble and knows no fear of anything.(P. 95)

The other kinds of shark, other than the mako shark, stand symbolically for the destroying forces of nature. They are the overwhelming natural odds against which Santiago pits himself. They are, also, the elements that strip Santiago of his material gain, the marlin (loss versus gain). That is why the sharks are connected with the negative forces against which Santiago and his party stand in opposition:

Santiago, the marlin, the mako shark, and the turtles

Versus

The other kinds of shark(with all the association of evil)

The sharks make the opposition (loss versus gain) very clear. The story of Santiago is the acquisition and the loss of the marlin and the possible reverberations of this dichotomy. We may find that we are gradually brought up to a degree of quiet tension we are able to accept. The rhythm of the story appears to be built on such a stress-yeild alternation. This is the constant wave-like operation of bracing and relaxation as in the systolic – diastolic movement of the human heart. (Baker, 1957: 31)

Beside emphasizing endurance as a value in this short novel, Hemingway emphasizes the value of victory or rather the "undefeated" (defeat = loss versus undefeat = victory = gain). The fundamental qualities of the old man – his humility, his simple reverence for the processes of life, and his capacity for suffering – serve to transform his defeat into a triumph as the divinity of Christ. This is clear in the final Christian symbolism of Santiago's cruciform posture. Santiago's suffering is symbolic of crucifixion. Hence Santiago's defeat is transformed into life (his future plans with the boy). Consequently we have the validity of Santiago's statement "man is destroyed but not defeated" which carries within itself its own focal and central opposition.

Notes:

1. There is a great deal of reverberations for the application of this binary character in literature. For example, there is Jacque Lacan's argument for understanding perception by means of recognizing the split subjectivity divided between "being" and the "social speaking self" (the split between moi / je). The ego is constructed by perception of object; it is not "in" the perception already. Lacanian psycholinguistics does not psychoanalyze a text as Freudian psycholinguistics does; it rescrutinizes the way meanings are made.
2. It is pertinent to refer to Saussure's distinction between the language system, la langue (the abstract rule-governed system) and the actual daily productive uses of language in speech and writing.
3. Levi Strauss, the master exponent of this type of structuralist analysis, brings together in his works, particularly, *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962) and the three volumes of *Mythologiques* (1964-68), a variety of insights from different disciplines to explore ways in which man has ordered and interpreted the sensory evidence by his environment to transform Nature (the "raw") into culture (the "cooked").

4. This and the rest of the references to the novel are taken from Earnest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974).

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: الخلاصة

تعد الثنائيات أساسية في الفكر البنيوي الذي غزا مختلف جوانب الحياة وتعد اللغة الأدبية واحدة من هذه الجوانب, إذ إنها الوسيلة الأكثر تعقيدا للتعبير عن المعاني الأدبية ففي نص ما يعبر عن المعنى الأدبي بشكل عقلائي. يبحث البنيويون وعلماء الإشارة عن البنى الداخلية متسائلين عن أنماط التعبير عن المعاني هذه وطرق تنظيمها. وتسلط البنيوية الضوء على هذه البنى التي تجد تداعياتها في البنية والنظام السطحي. ويستطيع القارئ, وفقا لهذا النحو البنيوي, أن يجد بعض الثنائيات ليتلمس المعاني الممكنة للنص الأدبي. إن اكتشاف مثل هذه الثنائيات هو واحدة من الإستراتيجيات المتبعة في القراءة والتفسير. لذلك, فما هذه الثنائيات إلا علامات (شفرات) تنتظر أن تكتشف (تفك). وتعد هذه العملية خطوة مهمة في اكتشاف رمزية النص, فيمكن أن تصنف الرموز إلى ثنائيات, فتساعدنا البنيوية, في مجال الأدب, في دراسة الأنماط والاتجاهات الداخلية التي ينطوي عليها الاستخدام الأدبي للغة. لذا فإنها ليست نظرية حسب, وإنما تمثل نقدا تطبيقيا.

ويمكن أن تتبع إستراتيجية الوصول إلى المعنى هذه في قراءة رواية (الشيخ والبحر) للكاتب ارنست همنجواي, إذ يفصح هذا العمل الذي فاز بجائزة نوبل للأدب عن المعاني الخافية التي يمكن أن تقرأ عند التركيز على البنية السطحية.