



RETIREES' PSYCHOLOGICAL STRUGGLES IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

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Abstract

This study explores and analyzes the psychological struggles of retirees as portrayed in Ernest Hemingway's novel The Old Man and the Sea. The research uses a qualitative method with a psychosocial theory approach. The data are collected through comprehensive reading and identifying relevant narrative, dialogue, and symbolic elements. The data are analyzed using Miles and Huberman's method, which includes data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The novel is viewed as a reflection of various psychological struggles, such as identity crisis, fear of uselessness, and loneliness. The results show that identity crisis is represented through Santiago's self-doubt after failing to catch fish for many days. He feels that he is no longer the great fisherman he once was. The fear of uselessness is shown through his physical weakness and the fact that he is no longer as strong as he was in his youth. Nevertheless, he continues to fight hard to prove that he is still useful and that his life still has meaning. Loneliness is illustrated by his solitary life: no wife, no children, and no close friends. In conclusion, the author wants to convey that people do not need to run away from the reality of growing old. Instead, they should accept it wholeheartedly and continue to live their old age with enthusiasm, meaning, and happiness.

Keywords: *psychological struggle, identity crisis, fear of uselessness, loneliness, retirement*

I. Introduction

Retirement is generally defined as a period when someone permanently stops working. Costa (1998:6) describes retirement as a sudden shift in life that implies a total and permanent departure from paid work. Atchley (1982:263) adds that it involves leaving work to focus on health or enjoy more free time. During this time, individuals rely on savings or pension funds for daily needs. Waluyo and Hamka (2022:14) note that retirees, once influential in the workplace, may no longer receive the same recognition and are often viewed as unproductive, leading to changes in their social, economic, and psychological status. As Nuryani (2022) points out, pensions help retirees sustain themselves without seeking new employment.

Retirement experiences vary depending on an individual's readiness. Many face psychological challenges, especially when unprepared. *BPJS Ketenagakerjaan* (2023) or Social Security Agency for Employment highlights causes such as loss of routine, loneliness, difficulty socializing, and post-

power syndrome, a decline in self-worth due to the loss of position.

From an organizational perspective, Turner and Helms (1991, cited in Hakim, 2007) explain that older workers may be retired due to decreased productivity, inflexibility, or physical limitations. As such, retirees are commonly identified as individuals no longer employed, dependent on pension income, experiencing lifestyle changes, and often grappling with identity loss and adjustment to new roles.

Erikson's psychosocial theory (1997), as outlined in *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version* particularly the stage of "integrity versus despair" is relevant to retirees who reflect on the meaning of their lives. Retirees often face identity crises, fear of uselessness, and loneliness. They may feel they have lost their social purpose, leading to despair, especially if lacking activity or support. A decline in health can worsen this state. Hence, support from family and community is essential to maintaining retirees' mental well-being.



In Indonesia, many retirees face both financial and psychological distress. *Dana Pensiun Lembaga Keuangan* (DPLK, 2023) or Financial Institution Pension Fund reports that seven out of 10 retirees encounter financial difficulties, with half continuing to work and nine out of 10 workers being unprepared for retirement. Surveys reveal that 70% of elderly Indonesians show signs of depression, and 50% have low mental health levels, often relying solely on children for support (Yunus, 2025).

Previous studies on *The Old Man and the Sea* have explored courage (Nainggolan, 2012), spiritual satisfaction (Gulo, 2013), resilience (Farooqui, 2021), internal and external conflict (Mogea, 2023), and general psycho-emotional elements (Sukiasyan, 2024), yet none has analyzed Santiago's psychological struggles specifically from the perspective of a retiree. This study fills that gap by focusing on Santiago's psychological challenges in his old age, including identity crisis, fear of uselessness, and loneliness. This study aims to deepen understanding of how literature reflects retirees' psychological realities and encourages greater empathy for the aging population through Santiago's experience in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

II. Research Methodology

The research uses a qualitative method with a psychosocial theory approach. The data are obtained from Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* published in 2009 done through comprehensive reading and identifying relevant narrative, dialogue, and symbolic elements. The data analysis method employs Miles and Huberman's method, which includes data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. All the data, then, are analyzed using Erikson's psychosocial development theory, which focuses on human psychological and social growth through eight life stages. In the final stage, individuals must confront the crisis of ego integrity versus despair. Erikson (1963, in van der Kaap-Deeder

et al., 2022) explains that older adults work to solve the "puzzle of life" and come to terms with their past. Success results in ego integrity; failure leads to regret and despair. Johansson (2002) emphasizes the importance of feeling valued and accepting life's events, which allows the elderly to maintain dignity and purpose. Erikson's theory, therefore, provides a useful framework for analyzing psychological experiences in old age as depicted in literature, including in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

III. Results and Discussions

This section presents the findings of the study and offers an in-depth analysis aligned with the research objectives and questions, using data drawn from Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. This novel tells the story of Santiago, an old fisherman who begins his struggle alone at sea. Despite his physical decline, Santiago's memories of youth and past glory fuel his persistence and courage. Once renowned for his strength and expertise, Santiago now faces 84 days without catching a single fish, earning ridicule from fellow fishermen. Nevertheless, on the eighty-fifth day, he ventures out again with unwavering hope and catches a massive marlin. The battle with the fish spans two days and showcases his enduring spirit. However, during his return, sharks attack and devour the marlin, leaving only its head and tail. Despite this loss, Santiago feels a sense of fulfillment. He returns home exhausted, and other fishermen, upon seeing the marlin's remains, are awestruck by its size, mistaking it for a shark, thus recognizing the greatness of his effort.

3.1 Identity Crisis

The author portrays Santiago as an elderly figure struggling with identity crisis, a condition common among retirees who feel a loss of purpose after no longer performing the roles that once defined them. Santiago, once a respected fisherman, is introduced as someone who "...had gone eighty-four days now without



taking a fish... the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky..." (11). This prolonged failure challenges his sense of identity and prompts others, including the boy Manolin's parents, to label him as "*salao*", the worst form of unlucky. Santiago's situation reflects what Manor (2016) states about retirees that when individuals are no longer active in their former roles, they begin to feel disconnected from their identity. His prolonged failure is not just a professional setback, but a symbolic test of his self-worth. Despite this, Santiago remains determined, showing patience, faith, and resilience. The number eighty-four itself symbolizes perseverance and the hope that persistence yields success.

A key moment that reveals his internal conflict is when he sits on the Terrace, silently enduring mockery and pity.

"They sat on the Terrace and many of the fishermen made fun of the old man and he was not angry... the older fishermen... were sad. But they did not show it." (12)

This shows that Santiago feels neglected, emotionally distant from his peers and society. Manolin is the only one who still admires him, even though his parents forbid him from fishing with Santiago.

Santiago's doubts are reflected in his self-reflection "I am a strange old man" (13). This line signifies a deeper alienation, he no longer sees himself as the strong, respected man he once was. His inner dialogue reveals a growing uncertainty about who he is without external validation or success.

The sea becomes a symbolic setting that mirrors Santiago's inner world. He calls it *la mar*, a feminine figure he loves and respects.

"The old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favours... The moon affects her as it does a woman" (21-22).

This feminized view contrasts with how younger fishermen perceive the sea as *el mar*, a masculine enemy. For Santiago, the sea is not just a workplace, but a place of emotional reflection and identity reclamation. Kannan (2018) affirms that the sea serves as a universe in miniature, reflecting Santiago's solitude, alienation, and struggle for meaning.

Even as he questions his luck, Santiago refuses to give up.

"I keep them with precision. Only I have no luck anymore. But who knows? Maybe today... It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready" (23).

This statement reflects Santiago's internal battle, not just to catch fish but to prove he is still worthy of being called a fisherman.

His monologue after killing the marlin affirms his self-identity: "You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman" (60). Here, fishing is not just about livelihood but also self-respect and purpose. Santiago's pride reaffirms that his identity lies not in material success but in principles and perseverance.

The recurring dream of lions symbolizes Santiago's youthful spirit. "He only dreamed... of the lions on the beach... He loved them as he loved the boy" (19). Al-Jasim and Obayes (2023) view lions as symbols of mental strength and youthful vitality. Santiago dreams of them even at the end: "The old man was dreaming about the lions" (71). Grobbelaar (2020) interprets this as a sign that Santiago's inner strength and identity remain intact, even when outward success fails.

Ultimately, Santiago's journey represents the psychological struggle of aging individuals who question their self-worth and place in society. Despite physical decline and social marginalization, he maintains a quiet dignity, seeking meaning not in external approval but in the values he has lived by. His identity crisis, then, is not a collapse, but a transformation, a



rediscovery of who he is beyond social roles and physical abilities.

3.2 Fear of Uselessness

Santiago's journey at sea is not merely a physical battle but also a psychological confrontation with the fear of uselessness, a condition commonly experienced by the elderly after retirement. This fear emerges when individuals begin to doubt their value or contribution to others due to age or declining physical ability (Mutran & Burke, 1979). In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway masterfully conveys this struggle through Santiago's experience of cramping while alone at sea, a moment that signifies both physical vulnerability and emotional humiliation "I hate a cramp," he thought. "It is a treachery of one's own body... A cramp... humiliates oneself especially when one is alone" (38). This physical betrayal evokes deep internal shame. Santiago feels his body is no longer reliable, and in his isolation, the humiliation becomes even more personal. Yet, despite this moment of weakness, he refuses to surrender. He continues to fish and endure pain, showing that his spirit persists beyond his physical limitations. According to Gruenewald et al. (2007), older adults often strive to remain useful by actively resisting decline, seeking ways to continue contributing meaningfully.

Santiago's defiance is clear in his declaration "But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures" (40). This line reveals his desire not to be seen as a burden. Even when others consider him old and ineffective, Santiago challenges this notion by proving that age does not determine worth. His effort to fish alone is a testament to his resistance to social irrelevance.

The author also presents Santiago's inner monologue as a source of motivation during his struggle. In one of the novel's most iconic lines, Santiago asserts "But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (59). This distinction between

destruction and defeat emphasizes that despite his failing body, Santiago preserves his dignity. The struggle itself is a source of self-worth, affirming that human value lies in perseverance rather than outcomes.

Although Santiago catches a marlin, the victory becomes symbolic when sharks devour the fish, leaving only its skeleton. Yet, he remains proud, not because of the tangible result, but because the struggle validates his continued relevance "You were born to be a fisherman as the fish was born to be a fish" (60). This makes Santiago realize that his identity does not lie in society's recognition but in his faithfulness to live according to his own values and beliefs. Despite his losses, he maintains his purpose and proves to himself that he is still useful, simply by staying true to who he is.

Ultimately, the author presents Santiago's confrontation with fear of uselessness as a universal reflection on aging. Many elderly people feel their efforts are no longer valued, especially when their work does not produce results like it once did. However, Santiago demonstrates that fulfillment comes not from what one achieves, but from continuing to strive. His unwavering effort, despite diminishing strength and social recognition, affirms that life remains meaningful as long as one refuses to give up.

3.3 Loneliness

Hemingway portrays Santiago as an elderly man deeply affected by loneliness, both physically and emotionally. Living alone in a small, modest shack with no partner, children, or close friends, Santiago's only meaningful relationship is with Manolin, the young boy he treats like a son. Santiago's longing for emotional connection is seen in his wistful remark "If you were my boy, I'd take you out and gamble... But you are your father's and your mother's" (12). This reveals a desire for familial closeness, a life he never had but deeply yearns for.



Santiago's hut reflects his isolation, containing only basic necessities and religious icons. His wife's photo, once displayed, is hidden away because "it made him too lonely to see it" (14). This act symbolizes a grief too heavy to confront daily. His home, instead of comfort, becomes a silent space of memory and sorrow, a reality common among elderly people experiencing isolation.

Another expression of loneliness is Santiago's habit of speaking aloud, a sign of long-term solitude. "He had probably started to talk aloud, when alone, when the boy had left" (26). No longer bound by the virtue of silence at sea, Santiago now speaks to himself to break the unbearable silence. It is a psychological mechanism to affirm his existence amid social detachment.

His repeated expression, "I wish the boy was here" (29–35), demonstrates his longing not just for help, but for emotional presence and recognition. Santiago wants someone to witness his struggle, especially when battling the marlin, so that his efforts feel meaningful. In the absence of companionship, Santiago begins to talk to the fish.

"Fish... I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you"(34)

"He is my brother... But I must kill him" (36), and finally, "You killed me, fish... Come on, kill me. I don't care who kills whom" (53)

These statements reflect how his loneliness transforms his perception of the fish, no longer just prey, but a companion and even a mirror of himself. Santiago's relationship with the marlin embodies the emotional conflict of needing connection, even if that connection ends in loss.

When Santiago finally kills the fish, he feels no joy. "I am a tired old man. But I have killed this fish which is my brother" (55). The loss of the marlin, his only company at sea, deepens his isolation. Instead of feeling

triumphant, he felt empty, showing that loneliness can persist even in victory.

Santiago's persistent thoughts of Manolin: "If the boy were here, he could rub it for me..." (38), "There is only the boy to worry, of course" (65), show how one human connection can sustain meaning in old age. Though Santiago has lost social standing and is no longer regarded as a great fisherman, Manolin becomes his last emotional anchor.

Santiago's loneliness reveals the psychological struggles of elderly people who, in the absence of meaningful roles or connections, often feel forgotten and useless. Yet, Hemingway shows that with even one bond, one person who cares, life can retain its meaning. Santiago's longing for Manolin represents a universal human need in old age: to feel recognized, needed, and loved.

IV. Conclusion

After analyzing *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, it can be concluded that the novel portrays three significant forms of psychological struggles experienced by the elderly: identity crisis, fear of uselessness, and loneliness. These struggles are embodied in the character of Santiago, an aging fisherman who no longer possesses the physical strength and social recognition he once had. Through internal monologues, symbolism, dreams, and his interactions with nature, the author illustrates Santiago's efforts to reclaim his identity, affirm his worth, and cope with solitude.

Ultimately, Hemingway conveys that aging is an inevitable and meaningful part of the human experience. Rather than denying or fearing old age, individuals are encouraged to embrace it with acceptance and dignity. Despite the physical and emotional challenges that may arise, old age can still offer opportunities for reflection, inner growth, and renewed purpose. By maintaining hope, setting new goals, and nurturing one's spirit, the elderly can experience a fulfilling and



respected stage of life. Furthermore, the novel emphasizes the importance of balancing mental and physical health, staying socially connected, and feeling valued by one's community. Support from family and society plays a crucial role in helping retirees avoid isolation and despair. Hemingway wanted to change other people's views on the way elderly people were portrayed in society where they were not a burden, but a valuable source of wisdom, experience, and inspiration. By fostering an inclusive and supportive environment, retirees can continue to live with dignity, self-worth, and purpose.

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