



Articles

A Space to Be: Ability, Disability, and the Inevitability of Corporeal Decline in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

Abstract

On July 2, 1961, nine years after he published *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway died by suicide in his home in Ketchum, Idaho. With his death a persona was born. To many, Hemingway represents the quintessential anti-disability writer, the author who lived for ability, who lost ability, and who ended his life when no hope of regaining ability remained. Drawing from disability scholars such as Michael Bérubé, Timothy Jay Dolmage, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, I demonstrate the ways *The Old Man and the Sea* complicates this narrative. In particular, the novella works to legitimize the disabled body, actively subverting several common narrative tropes such narrative prosthesis, the overcoming narrative, and the kill-or-cure dichotomy. In doing so, Hemingway creates 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.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Narrative Prosthesis, Narrative Theory

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Content warning: This piece contains discussions of suicide throughout.

On July 2 1961, nine years after he published *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway died by suicide in his home in Ketchum, Idaho. With his death, 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." 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 work seems to confirm this image. 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 and the Spanish Civil War. In each of these works a common theme emerges: an intense 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 certain thematic nuances within his texts. In his review of *Hemingway and the American Mythic Mind*, Earl Rovit addresses the public's need for a 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" (615). 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," 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) overcorrect, undervaluing the utility historical context has for literary analysis.

The nature of these disparate strategies renders 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 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.

Narrative theory helps reveal how Hemingway implicitly and explicitly manipulates narrative to create complexity and dissonance between reader and text. Here, I draw from narrative psychology Jerome Bruner's understanding of "folk psychology," the cultural use of narrative to create a set of normative descriptions around which communities construct meaning and shape personal identity (35). Values, Bruner claims, are communicated through culture and culture, in turn, is both shaped and mediated by "symbolic means" (23). Narrative not only represents values but also serves as a powerful tool for forming them. While traditional psychology, Bruner argues, plants itself in more positivistic roots, folk psychology exists forever in flux, adapting to a culture's ever changing contextual situation. Narrative drives this change.

Several disability scholars pick up and build on this conversation. In *Disability Rhetoric*, for example, Jay Timothy Dolmage acknowledges the power of myth to "shape both stories and lives," noting that modern conceptions of normativity have deep rhetorical and philosophical roots in modern myths. These myths work covertly in the modern imagination, serving to "mark and construct disability" (32). Narratives, thus, drive our collective understanding of disability, creating spaces in which disability and the disabled can (or cannot) operate. A similar idea permeates Michael Bérubé's *The Secret Life of Stories*. While he does not directly invoke the word "myth," Bérubé states his connection with narrative clearly. Narrative, he claims, is important because it "informs everything we think, do, plan, remember, and imagine" (3). Narrative forms space. In constructing a systematic method of disability narratology that posits the disabled not just as a character in a novel but as an actant outside of the narrative, Bérubé forwards a version of narrative theory that acknowledges the powerful nexus that exists between emergent conversation and myth. Narratives are not passive artifacts. They exist in conversation with space both shaping and being shaped by that which surrounds them.

Bérubé also takes important steps to nuance narrative conversations with disability studies through his introduction of what he calls "radical individuation." When done well, Bérubé argues, narrative theory distances itself from overly prescriptive lenses. When applying labels, scholars should bear in mind that narratives, like people, are highly nuanced and individualized artifacts. While I draw from Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis, I do so through Bérubé's critique of the theory. Rather than diverting attention away from disability and people with disabilities, *The Old Man and the Sea* subverts prosthetic readings, creating various mythologically adjacent storylines that "flirt" with reader expectations only to depart from them suddenly and unexpectedly. In this way, disability becomes, as Ato Quayson argues in *Aesthetic Nervousness*, a "fulcrum or pivot" from which "various discursive elements emerge, gain salience, and ultimately undergo transformation within the literary-aesthetic field" (34). As Quayson notes, disability (much like the sublime) is fundamentally and necessarily disruptive, a source of discomfort and uneasiness. Rather than obscuring this reality by engaging in various forms of fixative narrative prescripts, Hemingway subverts common disability mythologies, creating in the process a space in which new and important conversations can emerge.

Through this analysis, a more nuanced understanding of Hemingway's conceptualization of ability emerges, one that considers the transformation the human mind can (and, indeed, must) undertake when confronted with the reality of physical deterioration. The novella accomplishes this goal in two ways. First, it centralizes the theme of the inevitability of bodily degeneration, a theme that runs through the parallel storylines of the novella's three "great" characters. Second, the novella invokes but ultimately subverts several common disability narrative tropes, many of which appear in earlier sections of Hemingway's work. In doing so, *The Old Man* complicates overly psychodiagnostic narratives about the author, creating space for nuance in conversations about the author's life and death. More crucially, the novella forwards important conversations about ability, aging, and physical and mental decline, pushing readers to confront a reality in which 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 blends the mind/body paradigm, recognizing that one's understanding of the world intersects with one's personal embodied experience (Wilkerson 68). For example, embodiment scholars would note that Hemingway's understanding of the world in his younger years would necessarily have differed from those expressed in his later years, years in which he was unwell both physically and mentally. This focus on the biographical figure of Hemingway does open the door for the medical model. Although I invoke medical terminology within the following sections, I do not do so with the intention of reinserting into the text an attitude of rehabilitation. Instead, the medical terminology throughout serves as a tool for understanding the biological complications present in Hemingway's latter

life and thereby draws 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 this inclusion of the physiological that students and scholars of Hemingway often miss. This mistake can, in turn, lead to reductive narratives about Hemingway's life and death. A 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. In the process, it sheds several important physiological elements that complicate the narrative. Farah's invocation to avoid overly simplistic explanations rings especially true here; suicide is rarely simple, occurring most often as the result of varied and disparate factors rather than a single ideological construct or traumatic event. Indeed, trauma is by no means 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 well-documented suicide epidemic within the Hemingway household. ¹

And genetics remain but 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 ("Hemingway and Hemochromatosis" 62). Given the possibility of more natural explanations, Beegel criticizes Hemingway scholars for their willingness to "psychologize" Hemingway's death (65). To fully understand Hemingway, psychology and physiology must converge. She sums up her criticism succinctly at the close of her essay, noting that "Doctors have long known that organic and mental processes are tightly interwoven," and chastising biographers and critics for focusing on "the psychological dimensions of the author's suicide to the exclusion of its physiological causes" (64). Her conclusion follows: "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 characterizing Hemingway's suicide as the natural conclusion to an ableist philosophy provides tidiness and closure, it ultimately falls short. Scholars would do well to embrace a more nuanced understanding of Hemingway's understanding of ability, one that takes into account both variability in Hemingway's conceptualization of ability throughout his lifetime.

While Beegel's called for a closer look at the physiological elements of Hemingway's suicide in 1990, considerable progress in physiological scholarship has come within the past decade. More recently, the groundbreaking work *Hemingway's Brain* by psychiatrist Andrew Farah provides a more thorough analysis of the physiological effects of Hemingway's genetics and lifestyle. Like Beegel, Farah argues for a more balanced understanding of the writer. Farah's primary accomplishment is his work to clean up the superfluity of diagnoses posited for Hemingway's behavior. Rejecting many common explanations for Hemingway's suicide, including post-traumatic stress, bipolar disorder, and even hemochromatosis, ² Farah focuses on a few specific factors such as genetics, alcoholism, and traumatic brain injuries. He links each of these factors to a broader diagnosis of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a trauma induced, neurodegenerative disease that has gained recent fame through its linkage to several American football players. Farah cites a "mixed etiology" (159) for this diagnosis, noting Hemingway's history of head trauma not only from war injuries and boxing but also from a variety of accidental traumas. In all, Hemingway suffered at least nine major concussive head traumas, requiring several medical sutures, multiple extended stays in a hospital, and even one premature obituary. Despite repeated warnings from medical professionals, Hemingway's brain trauma rarely slowed his uncontrolled drinking habits. Farah notes that before Hemingway's fortieth birthday, despite still having 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 (53-55).

As Farah notes, the "illness of dementia...clarifies much of the biography of his last decade" (53). It also provides a plausible explanation for a variety of puzzling symptoms, including Hemingway's mental descent into delusion and hallucination, his frequent mood swings, and his inability to focus on tasks for extended times. Importantly, Farah's diagnosis also draws scholars back to the years well before Hemingway's suicide, years which prove fundamental for a genuine understanding of Hemingway's death. Despite public perception, Hemingway's decline was not sudden. Rather, it was the culmination of several varying factors dating as far back as the early 1940s, 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 from 1943 to 1944 (Reynolds 90-91). Regardless, Farah's argument is persuasive, providing the psychological and physiological background through which scholars can reassess Hemingway's later work. In the decade leading up to his publication of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway was profoundly unwell, both mentally and physically, and he had been for some time.

The Novella's Three "Great" Characters

Hemingway's age and health at the time he was writing provide a plausible reason for his choice of Santiago as protagonist, the "old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream" (9). This is not to suggest that Santiago *is*, one-to-one, a surrogate for Hemingway. Of all of Hemingway's protagonists, few stray so markedly from Hemingway's oft-noted propensity toward autobiography. Still, aspects of Santiago's character link him to certain facets of the writer's lived experience. A common reading of the novella, for example, centers Santiago and Hemingway's joint

struggles to successful producer in their profession of choice (Young, Cummings, 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 so far as to 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 may overstate this connection, 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 one-to-one, Hemingway-to-Santiago reading, carefully noting the parallels between the two characters follows precedent set by past scholarship.

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 defining characteristic. While Santiago is the central character's name, the name only appears four times in the entire novella. In the remaining 221 instances, Hemingway addresses his protagonist simply as "the old man," 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 aspects of his identity, including his status as a fisherman. [3](#)

Hemingway establishes this theme through his repetition of the word "great," a stylistic device that he uses to link each of the novella's trifold of "great" characters. This tactic is a familiar one to his readers. For example, in "In Another Country," Hemingway repeats two motifs, the image of looking through a window, symbolizing isolation and separation, and the invocation of the word "hawk," used to suggest differences between the main characters and his Italian acquaintances. In "A Canary for One," Hemingway builds this repetition into his character's dialogue. This act, critic Robert Paul Lamb argues, both lends a level of reality to the scene and highlights reality that the characters are talking past each other (464–465). Repetition in some form appears in nearly all of Hemingway's stories, as, for example, it does in the *Old Man* through the repetition of phrases—"I wish the boy were here"—or scenarios such as Santiago's dream of lions playing on the beach. While these repeated motifs are notable, the word repetition that I highlight differs slightly.

Hemingway's repetition of the word "great" more closely echoes Jasim Mohammed Hasan's semantic analysis of repetition within *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hasan focuses on Hemingway's inclusion of "key words" in his texts to highlight important themes in his texts, a category that he calculates by "comparing the frequency of each word in the novel with that of the same word in the Hemingway Corpus" (31). For example, a significant key word within *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hasan notes, is the word "now," a word that Hemingway uses twice as frequently within the work as he does in his other novels. In this way, the novel highlights the importance of living life with urgency and immediacy: "There is nothing else than *now*. There is neither yesterday, certainly, nor is there any tomorrow. There is only *now*, and if *now* is only two days, then two days is your life and everything in it will be in proportion.... A good life is not measured by any biblical span" (*For Whom the Bell Tolls* 94, *emphasis added*). Through "key words," Hemingway weaves this message into the very fabric of the story. He creates a narrative that demonstrates a central thematic message both causally (through narrative plot) and expositionally (through semantic repetition).

In *The Old Man*, Hemingway uses the same technique, repeating the word "great" to tie together specific characters and to forefront the text's central motif. Hemingway's repetition of the term is not subtle. Within the novella's roughly twenty-seven thousand words, the word "great" (or some variation of it [4](#)) appears seventy-one times, claiming .262% (one use per 381 words) of the text. The word often appears multiple times in a single paragraph, as it does in the following section: "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?' (103–104, *emphasis added*). Comparatively, this percentage far outpaces any of Hemingway's previous works. In *The Sun Also Rises*, for example, Hemingway uses the word at a rate of .07% (one per 1,428 words), a number which *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (.063%) effectively matches. In *A Farewell to Arms*, the word's usage takes an even more dramatic dip, sprinkled a sparse forty-nine times in over ninety thousand words, a rate of .054% (one per 1,851). Most relevant to this conversation given its proximity to *The Old Man* is *Across the River and Into the Trees*, published just two years prior to *The Old Man and the Sea*. If the word "great" had become a pet word for Hemingway later in life, readers would expect to see the pattern mirrored in this novel. In *Across the River*, however, Hemingway only slightly increases the word's usage rating, visiting it at a 0.085% clip (one per 1,176 words). In one work, then, Hemingway effectively quadruples the ratio at which he uses a word, a stylistic divergence which is both significant and intentional.

This repetition serves a dual purpose, both introducing thematically the issue of physical decay through the idea of "greatness lost" while also emphasizing the link between the novel's three "great" characters. Embedded within the text is the idea that "greatness," those things that one traditionally looks to as indicative of success, are temporary, whether they be one's everyday profession (as it is for Santiago), status as an athlete and cultural icon (in Joe DiMaggio's case), or brute strength (as is true of the fish). While the conspicuous connection between Hemingway the struggling writer and Santiago the struggling fisherman exists, it is hardly the only parallel present between the two.

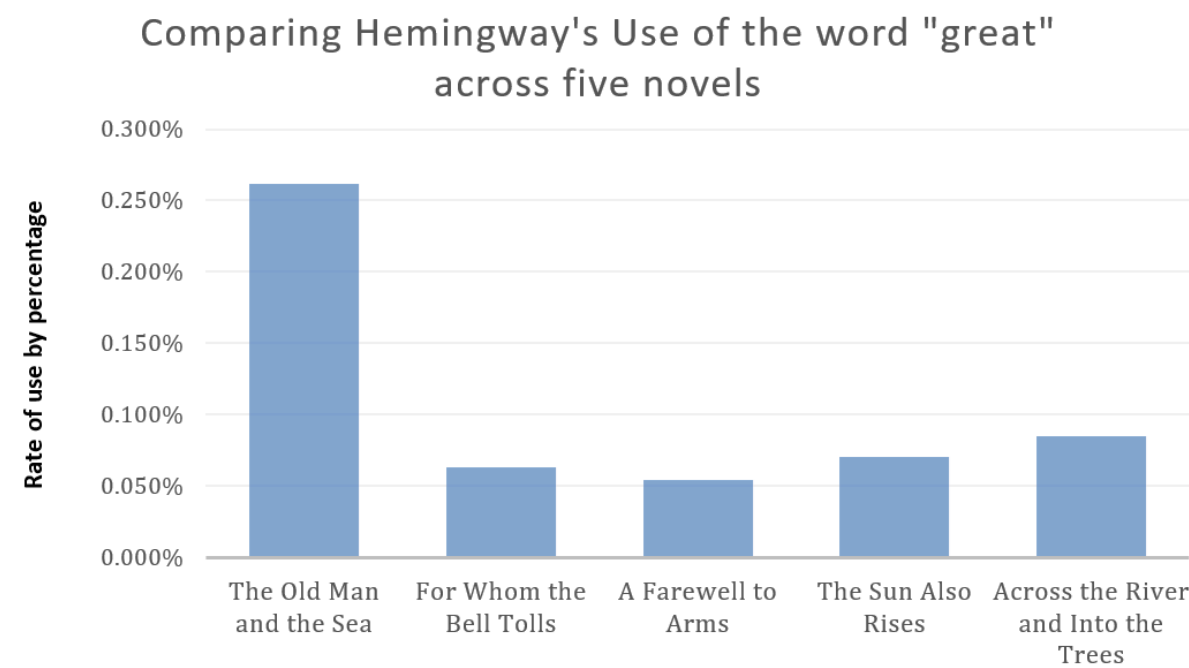


Figure 1: A bar graph depicting Hemingway's use of the word "great" across five novels. From left to right, *The Old Man and the Sea* .262%, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* .063%, *A Farewell to Arms* .054%, *The Sun Also Rises* .07%, *Across the River and Into the Trees* .085%

It is not Santiago, for example, who first merits the descriptor "great" but a baseball player, Joe DiMaggio, a character that makes consistent appearances throughout the text. The initial reference occurs within 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, *emphasis added*). DiMaggio's name appears seven more times, invoked predominantly as a source of inspiration to Santiago. In every instance, the descriptor "great" precedes DiMaggio's name: "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).

Although Santiago relates to DiMaggio through their mutual experience as master craftsmen, their primary connection is through the physical 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 retrospectively. 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.

By the time *The Old Man* was published in 1952, DiMaggio's decline was complete. After the 1951 season, a thirty-six-year-old DiMaggio retired from baseball, his body unable to withstand the physical toll the sport demanded. The narrative's original audience, embedded in the historical reality of 1952, would have been acutely aware of the reason for DiMaggio's inclusion in the text. The "great DiMaggio," Santiago's source of inspiration, will never fully recover from his bone spurs. Instead, after two injury plagued seasons, he retires, his body no longer capable of handling the stress of professional athletics.

Hemingway purposefully ties DiMaggio to Santiago, the novella's second significant "great" character. Hemingway makes this connection explicitly in Santiago's a conversation with Manolin about baseball: "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 apparent; just as Luque and Mike Gonzalez are the greatest managers, and DiMaggio is the greatest baseball player, so too Santiago stands alone in his profession. In Manolin's eyes, he is the Joe DiMaggio of his profession, the greatest of all fishermen.

In many ways, Santiago's story parallels that of DiMaggio. Like DiMaggio, Santiago's status as a great fisherman is a tag earned for things past rather than present. The scars on his hands "deep-creased [with] scars from handling heavy fish on the cords" stand testament to this reality (10). After offering this detail, however, Hemingway immediately qualifies the statement: "but none of these scars were fresh" (10). Similarly, while fishing, Santiago reminisces on a time when he won a twenty-four-hour arm-wrestling bout against the "strongest man on the docks" (69). As with the scars, however, the story is quickly qualified: "he was not an old man then but was Santiago *El Campeon*" (70). Santiago is "*El Campeon*" only in a former sense, his days of physical mastery over.

Like DiMaggio, Santiago's physical decline directly impacts his present circumstances. Although Santiago denies it, readers are presented with at least a suspicion that his eighty-four-day fishing drought may 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 groups of fishermen bringing their catches into town (11). Manolin, in particular, is remarkably successful during the course of the story, catching four marlin during the three days that Santiago was out, "[o]ne the first day. One the second and two the third" (124). Santiago's explanation for his dry spell is that he is *salao*, "the worst form of unlucky" (9), but this explanation might be read as a form of self-deception, a tactic Santiago engages in repeatedly when faced with a reality that he finds too difficult to confront directly. [5](#)

More concrete examples of Santiago's physical limitations occur during his battle with the great fish. Early in the battle, the text emphasizes Santiago's physical limitation when, after feeling the fish take the line, Santiago waits for the precise moment to set the hook. After waiting a moment, he makes his move, striking hard "with both hands" and "swinging with each arm alternately on the cord with all the strength of his arms and the pivoted weight of his body." Despite his great effort, "Nothing happened. The fish just moved away slowly and the old man could not raise him an inch" (44). He is physically incapable of altering the course of the fish. Later, Santiago's left hand cramps (58) and remains useless for the majority of the story's remainder, a fact that he finds "humiliating" (62). 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. In this way, he reflects both DiMaggio and Hemingway, individuals whose physical declines jeopardize their ability to succeed in their chosen professions.

Santiago's battle with his own body is psychological as well. While Santiago's hands and back do limit him, it is his mind as much as his body that betrays him. The text offers numerous examples of Santiago's mental battles. For example, while thinking of his cramped hand, for example, Santiago briefly entertains cutting it off, an idea that he immediately sees as folly, berating himself for "not being clear-headed" (85). Although the temptation was clearly not serious, he later repeats this self-talk, "Now you are getting confused in the head.... You must keep your head clear" (92), an invocation he makes several more times throughout the novel: "Last for me, head. Last for me. You never went" (91). "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" (92). "Clear up, head," he said in a voice he could hardly hear. "Clear up." (92).

Lurking behind Santiago's these details is the reality that in the near future, his intellect, his primary means for livelihood, will erode. This reality poses as much a threat to his professional future as his physical decline. 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... [b]ut I know many tricks" (23). 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 extended periods of time, working single-mindedly on a particular piece. Replacing those are a half-a-dozen scattered and unfinished manuscripts totaling thousands of pages complete with ominous edit-in-case-of-death instructions (Didion).

The "great fish" completes the novella's triangulation of declining characters. No character amasses more instances of the word "great" than the fish, drawing the descriptor twenty-four total times. [6](#) Read alongside DiMaggio and Santiago, the fish becomes not an antagonist or even as a neutral character but rather Santiago's co-protagonist. He is the third declining character, one that takes on personhood throughout the progression of the novella. Santiago makes this point himself, asserting the fish's moral worth as equal to that of his own: "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" (92). Repeatedly, Santiago 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" (110).

The fish's arc functions as an escalated retelling of Santiago's and DiMaggio's story. 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 great fish, from the hook, held in his mouth tightly so the "pain could drive him mad" (88). Like Santiago and DiMaggio, the fish finds himself battling against an ethereal force, a power that "it does not comprehend" (76). This force, omnipresent and mysterious, drives the fish to his physical limits until moments before his death, exhausted and hungry, he gives in, turning "gently on his side," his great chest fin rising "high into the air to the altitude of the man's chest" (94). In *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* Philip Young introduces the hugely influential (and controversial) theory of the Hemingway code hero, a figure—generally not the central protagonist—that demonstrates and often teaches Hemingway's core values: grace under pressure, suffering without fear or complaint, emotional fortitude. When Young proclaims Santiago "the first of the code heroes to have grown old" (124) he does so because he has neglected to consider the fish as a viable character in the plot. Indeed, Young's diagnosis of Santiago as the novella's code hero ignores the fact that Santiago must undergo his own character arc throughout the novel, one that is finally fulfilled when he shows himself capable of accepting help. For this reason, Young's

conclusion—that *In the Old Man and the Sea*, for the "first time, in all of Hemingway work...the code hero and the Hemingway hero have not been wholly distinct"—misses the mark. It ignores the reality that Santiago's narrative arc is spurred largely by his collision with the great fish. If *The Old Man and the Sea* has a code hero, it is the fish. Its gentle dignity and fighting spirit are the lynchpin for Santiago's transformation (126).

Read through this lens, the great fish gains a new importance within the novella, both driving the plot and modeling the Hemingway code. Simultaneously, of the three "great" characters, the fish most fully encapsulates the novel's central theme of corporeal decline. Although the text clearly implies DiMaggio's and Santiago's future, the story fully captures the entirety of its thematic 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 subjugation and death. The message, though morose, is clear. Even the strongest ultimately weaken, and, in the end, no amount of greatness can save one from the inevitability of bodily decay.

Subverting Common Disability Tropes

Although it is important that scholars address the thematic importance of disability within *The Old Man and the Sea*, an equally essential element of the narrative is how it portrays disability. In fact, the care the novella takes to reject a variety of regressive portrayals of disability is one of its major triumphs. These rejections are particularly notable because many of these narrative tropes appear in earlier works within Hemingway's oeuvre. One such narrative device is what Mitchell and Snyder term "narrative prosthesis," defined by the duo as the frequent use of disability throughout history "as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power" (49). This note on the characterization of disability 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 considerable number of disabled characters present within literature. Narrative prosthesis focuses on the roles of these characters, noting that narratives often relegate disabled characters to the margins, disability tasked with the role of providing symbolic significance or moving the plot forward (60). Within this framework, the role of the disabled is to act upon and develop the storyline and/or the able-bodied character. Once the author has accomplished this purpose, the disabled character has served their "function" and the reader's eye can then be redirected in a more desirable direction.

This critique is precisely the criticism scholars levy against Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, a story which follows impotent protagonist Jake Barnes as he attempts to reintegrate into post-war Europe. Indicative of the complex form Hemingway's attitude toward disability took, few consensus readings emerge among critics. Several authors, however, have noted prosthetic elements within the text. Dana Fore's "Life Unworthy of Life?" for example links the novel to the cultural tendency to push for the rehabilitation of the disabled, arguing that "the experiences of emasculated war hero Jake Barnes reflect Hemingway's awareness of what researchers call a 'medical model' of disability" (76). In a strikingly pessimistic reading of the novel's concluding 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 "Straight, Pure, and Natural," Aaron Sheehan connects *The Sun Also Rises* explicitly with *narrative prosthesis*, arguing that this prosthetic connection manifests in two ways, what he calls "gear and girder" prose (152) and the novel's idealized bullfighter, Pedro Romero. Sheehan links this prosthesis to Barnes' love interest Brett Ashley, arguing that Barnes frames Ashley as the proverbial "hysterical" female. The narrative's penile substitute, Pedro Romero, becomes Barnes' tools for "curing" Ashley's illness (Sheehan notes that dildos and vibrators were often medically prescribed as ways to cure hysteria). In this way, the novel seeks to "normalize" Ashley, creating in her someone who represents "properly functioning womanhood," a "straight, pure, and natural" woman (171).

It is Deborah Susan Mcleod's work on disability in modernist literature, however, that most thoroughly demonstrates the novel's prosthetic elements. Mcleod's work highlights the myriad of disabled characters present within modernist literature, arguing that although modernist writers tend to avoid the kill-or cure-trope, others rise in its 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 her insightful reading of the text, Mcleod argues 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 is not to represent a unique member of the disabled community. Rather, Hemingway uses disability 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 character, then, is reduced to a rhetorical function, a prosthetic device meant to symbolize defects in the post-war generation.

Initially, *The Old Man and the Sea* seems to deploy narrative prosthesis in the ways 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 inevitable, a narrative in which, through a series of difficult and potentially fatal challenges, the archetypal "wise old sage" passes his wisdom down to his more able-bodied apprentice who rises to

take his place. However, no sooner has he foreshadowed this narrative pattern than the story departs abruptly from it, removing Manolin almost entirely from the novella. While Manolin undoubtedly does hold a key role in the narrative, Hemingway flips the prosthetic paradigm on its head, choosing to center the story, both experientially and thematically, on Santiago. This gaze remains unflinchingly focused, even at Manolin's narrative reentrance in the novella's final section.

It is Manolin, ultimately, who must reorient himself in relation to Santiago, a reality that undermines the classic pattern of narrative prosthesis. When readers first encounter Manolin, he has reluctantly left Santiago to fish with a more successful boat. In purely capitalistic terms, he has improved his situation. However, after Santiago's return, the boy revises this judgment, announcing at the close of the novel, "Now we fish together again" (125). Exactly as he did at the beginning of the novel, Santiago protests, arguing that he is "not lucky anymore." This time, however, Manolin rejects this line of reasoning, replying "The hell with luck...I'll bring the luck with me" (125). In doing so, Manolin models a rejection of what critic Michael Oliver terms "the economic and social forces of capitalism" (4), which marginalizes disability by subscribing value in terms of materialistic output. Within a purely capitalistic paradigm, Manolin's decision to leave a "successful" boat makes little sense. For Manolin's decision to be reasonable, a new paradigm must exist, one that goes beyond the constraints of supply and demand. The novel's unflinching focus on Santiago creates the framework for precisely such a narrative.

In *The Secret Life of Stories*, scholar Michael Bérubé adds an important corrective to Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis. Although Bérubé acknowledges the importance of the theory—he calls it "the single most important account of narrative in disability studies" (41)—he also notes that the theory can become reductive, leading to a "degree of programmatic determinism...whereby narrative always and inevitably does X." Bérubé's addendum is, in his own words, more modest: "Some narratives do X. Some do not." (53). Bérubé's revision, when applied to this conversation, links nicely. I am persuaded by Mcleod's argument that, in *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway explicitly engages in narrative prosthesis, creating a character whose physical impediment exists predominantly to provide commentary on a separate community. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, however, he does not.

Indeed, it is this active resistance of narrative prosthesis that makes the novella so compelling. 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, 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 1950s on loneliness among the elderly were less developed than they are today, the topic was an identified and developing field of study. In a 1952 public health report, for example, Paul Lemkau observed, "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 added, "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 related 1955 study, D. Grant observed a similar pattern, writing that elderly people often feel as if they are "parasites on society," and urging his readers to take action: "[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, its imprint is throughout. The sole occurrence takes place near the beginning, a quick aside the narrator makes about a picture in Santiago's hut: "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" (16, *emphasis added*). Already, Santiago feels the ostracization from society noted in Grant's study. The narrator observes that "many of the fishermen made fun of the old man." Others "looked at him and were sad," attempting to make polite small talk but mostly avoiding him (11). Santiago's one meaningful relationship has been taken from him. Even though verbally endorses Manolin's departure to a different boat, his actions suggest otherwise. When he is alone on the water, he repeats the phrase "I wish I had the boy" or some variant of it 6 separate times. ⁷ On the second of these, he adds a simple but telling insight into the loneliness of aging: "No one should be alone in their old age...But it is unavoidable" (48).

Through the emotional layering of Santiago's character, readers are encouraged to understand the story as more than a narrative about an old man who fishes. It is a story of an aging man who experiences very real emotions such as joy, surprise, anger, and loneliness. Far from being relegated to a narrativistic device, Santiago is a deeply human and emotive character, the central element of the text. Perhaps this is why Hemingway reacted so strongly against symbolic interpretations of the text. "There isn't any symbolism," Hemingway wrote in a 1952 letter to critic Bernard Berenson. "The sea is the sea. The old man is the old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The sharks are sharks,

no better, no worse" (Baker 780). Although critics have dismissed Hemingway's claim, they do so at their own peril. Perhaps the old man simply *is* the old man, "no better, no worse," his social, emotional, and physical reality reasons enough to warrant engagement, a reality that symbolic readings of the text obscure.

The text also admirably avoids a second common disability trope, the overcoming narrative. Within this narrative structure, disability is depicted as a mental or physical barrier that can be overcome through willpower. Scholar Joseph Shapiro terms such characters "supercrises," the "inspirational disabled person" who gains fame by either mustering enough willpower to overcome a disability or unlocking a special talent that offsets the disability (16). As Dolmage notes, such a narrative arc suggests three problematic 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. Given the narrative's setup—that of an aging fisherman battling against a great fish—the overcoming narrative presents a distinct temptation for this text. For the majority of the story, in fact, *The Old Man* flirts with precisely such a narrative arc, teasing yet another rousing anecdote 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 mind that will not remain clear. It is a familiar narrative and a comforting one.

But the text addresses much larger themes than those of willpower and success. If Santiago succeeds, what follows? While this fish may generate income and social relevance for a time, eventually Santiago must catch more fish, an act that will continue to become more difficult as he ages. If Santiago successfully brings in his fish, the narrative disguises the reality that the disabled body must perform not just once to gain "relevance" but must do so continuously. As Susannah B. Mintz notes, overcoming stories can "obscure the reality of most disabled people's lives, reinforcing desires for rehabilitation or cure and deflecting attention from [more pressing concerns]" (113). This reality highlights the importance that the narrative end not with success but as it does, with Santiago "beaten...finally and without remedy" (119). Such an ending draws attention away from the overcoming narrative and onto the greater narrative, the unstable position in which disabled persons continually live. Santiago's failure opens the door for conversations about representation, accessibility, the need for social support structure and access to services. Santiago, the fisherman who feels, dreams, and hurts like any other human being lacks the physical ability to simply survive.

The kill-or-cure dichotomy presents a third temptation for the text. Indeed, biographer Michael Reynolds notes that Hemingway did, in fact, consider killing off his protagonist, writing Santiago's death into early proof manuscripts before abandoning the idea in later drafts (*Final Years* 235). Initially, such a conclusion seems logical. If Santiago cannot catch the fish, at least let him die a heroic death. But the kill-or-cure dichotomy generates similar problems to that of the overcoming narrative. If Santiago dies, 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, exactly as he leaves Robert Jordan with his mangled leg poised to die heroically fighting fascists in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Yet, as the narrative concludes, readers are confronted with a more difficult reality, that of Santiago asleep in his hut. Though tired and hurt, he is still very much alive. Read through Hemingway's own struggle with physical degeneration, the novella's ending gains particular salience. Santiago's survival highlights Hemingway's own struggle for life and relevance in a world in which he increasingly struggles to operate. If Hemingway hopes to 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. This reality is different from that of Santiago, one that is safe, communal, and operates by different performative expectations. It is precisely this reality that he attempts to create through his depiction of Santiago within *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Conclusion

In offering this reading of *The Old Man*, I do not mean to suggest that Hemingway never again demonstrated ableist rhetoric; what I do hope to achieve, however, is an applied understanding of Farah's advice to acknowledge the complexity of Hemingway's life. Here, I echo Michael Bérubé's call for radical individuation. Lives, like stories, are complicated, varying, and inconsistent. Before answering the question of whether Hemingway advanced an ideology of ability, we must pause and ask, "Which Hemingway?" Although it is tempting to build a coherent and tidy narrative around Hemingway, doing so ignores the manifold realities surrounding his life and death. 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 1950s was not the Hemingway of years past. Rather, he was an amalgamation of many disparate parts, some ideological but many physiological. He was, in other words, an embodied and dynamic individual, a man whose death by suicide cannot be easily packaged away under the blanket statement of ableism.

The Old Man and the Sea reads differently than portions of Hemingway's earlier work, working to foreground the reality of disabled bodies by forefronting the reality of corporeal decline and unsettling common disability mythologies that attempt to shelter readers from this reality. In the process, the narrative humanizes conversation around disability and aging, drawing attention to not only the inevitability of physical decline but also to the reality of *living* in a disabled body. Hemingway, aging, in pain, and profoundly unwell attempts through fiction to carve out a space to be,

one in which value is measured not through external metrics, be they great fish, literary success, or any other set of quantifications. As the novella closes, Santiago's initial dilemma remains largely unchanged. He is still an old man who fishes in a skiff in The Gulf Stream. Now rather than eighty-four days without taking a fish, his streak has been extended to eighty-eight. Still, one thing has changed: henceforth, he will no longer be alone. Moved by Santiago's plight, Manolin vows to forsake the economic surety of a lucky boat : "Now we fish together again" (125). Comforted by the promise of companionship, Santiago sleeps, dreaming, as he does when he is happy, of lions lounging on the beaches of Africa.

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Endnotes

1. Within Hemingway's immediate family alone, suicide claimed four members, including his father, Clarence; brother, Leicester; sister, Ursula; and daughter, Margeaux (5 total deaths, including that of Ernest).
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2. 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).
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3. Hemingway does not, for example, choose to address Santiago as the fisherman or even the old fisherman
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4. Such as "greater" and "greatest."
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5. Early in the text, for example, while conversing with Manolin, Santiago pretends that he has yellow rice with fish ready for dinner, a game that Manolin plays along with although he knows it to be "a fiction" (16–17). Manolin also pretends that he needs to borrow Santiago's cast net, a request which the old man quickly grants despite both knowing that it has already been sold (15).
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6. "Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked" (48); "But what a great fish he is" (49); "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" (50); "But he cannot pull this skiff forever, no matter how great he is" (52); "He is a great fish and I must convince him, he thought" (63).
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7. "I wish I had the boy" the old man said aloud. "I'm being towed by a fish and I'm the towing bit" (45); "I wish I had the boy. To help me and to see this" (48); "I wish the boy was here," he said aloud and settled himself against the rounded planks of the bow (50); Aloud he said, "I wish I had the boy." But you haven't got the boy, he thought. You have only yourself (52); If the boy was here he would wet the coils of line, he thought. Yes. If the boy were here. If

the boy were here (83).

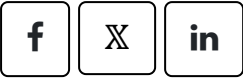
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