

The Old Man and Hemingway

by Khem K. Aryal

The professor who taught us *The Old Man and the Sea* at the intermediate level was very old, at least to us 17- or 18-year olds. He held the thin book close to his eyes, read a few lines from it to us, a confused lot that was taking an English literature class for the first time, lowered the book below his chin so that we could see his face, and praised Ernest Hemingway before interpreting the lines he'd just read out to us. He said Hemingway was one of the greatest novelists in the world. (Soon we would begin to say Hemingway was the greatest novelist in the world, and the professor would correct us that there was no such thing as the greatest novelist.) He said Hemingway showed the world the horrors of war. Above all else, he emphasized, Hemingway wrote simple prose. He added quickly that writing simply was not easy, as if to warn us not to dismiss the great author because he wrote simple prose.

I didn't understand why and how writing simply was not easy. None of us in class did, I believe. But we couldn't ask him the question. That was not the point, in fact. We had to understand the meaning of the novel, interpret it and prepare ourselves for a question or two that might be asked on the final exam, some nine months away. So the old man of the novel, Santiago, became the focus and our fascination.

None of us had seen the sea. We were born in the mountains, had completed tenth grade from schools in rural villages, and moved to the district headquarters where the college was located. The idea that one old man goes to the sea in a boat and fights a shark for his life was very alien to us, and it was exotic. What was the old man like? We began to see him in the man who stood in front of us and read selections from the novel, the old professor. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated!" the professor said to us like a

philosopher, as if it was his own insight, an insight he had had from living life so far. As he explained what it meant, how it defined the old fisherman's life, he fully emersed in the old man, and the creator of the old fisherman, Hemingway. I saw him as being all the three old men together: himself, Santiago, and Hemingway (assuming that Hemingway was old too).

"Did you read old man?" we asked each other before class started, which meant: Did you read Hemingway for the class? Did you read for the old professor? Did you read about Santiago? Did you read the novel? All of them together.

One day the professor told us about Hemingway's drinking habit. The following day we had stories about our professor's tea drinking quirk.

"You know what Gunjeshwori Sir does when he enters a teashop?" one of my classmates asked, as we waited for the professor. Then there went the story: Whenever he went to a teashop in town he would make an order for two cups of tea. The teashop owner would look at him, confused; there stood only one person but he ordered two cups of tea—did they hear him correctly? The professor would repeat, "Two cups," and go sit in a corner and start reading a book. "Many teashops bring him two cups these days without being asked," the story concluded to the class's extreme amusement.

Now I understand that we were trying to see Hemingway in the professor. We were trying to bring the man from a distant land, the man who was very different from who we were and what we represented, down to us as somebody who we could see, understand, and identify with. We were reading for the first time about someone who came from so far away (disregarding fairy tales and fables), written by someone who we would never get to meet even if he were alive. The names sounded strange to us, the context was new, and

in fact there was nothing for us in the book to identify with, except the meaning of the book, which we were trying to decipher. But where does meaning come from? It can't be just picked from the roadside and put in somebody's head. It begins with who we are, what we are, and how we interact with the text, with the outside world. We need a link to connect us with the external, a means to extend who we are. On one level meanings are projections of ourselves. We were using the professor, at least I was as I understand it now, as a means to bring the unknown down to the known. He was an idol we made to bring God down to earth.

Gunjeshwori Sir, as we called him, became the face of the distant people we were reading about. There was no way we would get to visit the places the stories we were reading were set in. There was no way we would ever meet those people. Those people from Britain and America. So far away. So different from us. The professor made it possible for us to have access to them. I would complete Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English literature, Gunjeshwori Sir always at the back of my head. When it came to Hemingway, he was, and is, always there, like the author's doppelganger.

Many years have passed, and I hear my second year in Jonesboro that the professor has passed away. (I never saw him again after I left the small town for Kathmandu and then for America.)

The moment I joined Arkansas State, my colleagues let me know about what Jonesboro had to offer. Among other things they said there were many literary pilgrimage sites for a writer like me. Faulkner was born only 150 miles away from there. Eudora Welty less than 300 miles away. Maya Angelou a little more than 200 miles away. And there was the Hemingway-Pfeiffer museum, a place that Hemingway frequently visited and where he wrote part of his novel *A Farewell to Arms*, within one hour's drive. I was excited at that time because I didn't expect Jonesboro to be in such proximity to those writer's birthplaces. "Wow!" I responded and quickly got lost in the responsibilities the new job brought. Those sites

remained at the back of my mind, as they do even now, and gave me a spiritual lattice, but I never had the chance to visit any of them.

The news of the professor's passing creates an emptiness in me. Then suddenly I have the urge to visit the Hemingway-Pfeiffer museum. I would attend Gunjeshwori Sir's funeral if I were back in his town, but here in Jonesboro the museum seems to be the site where I can pay some sort of tribute to my teacher. After all, Gunjeshwori Sir, Hemingway, and Santiago had become one entity in my consciousness long ago, and it somehow remained intact no matter how naïve it may sound.

It becomes a family trip to the museum.

On the way, I tell my wife and son about Gunjeshwori Sir to their relative disinterest. He was the one who introduced me to Hemingway, I say. In fact, to English literature as a whole. He died recently, I speak to deaf ears.

The car plows through the cotton fields that are dull to look at. There is nothing to be excited about in the small towns we pass. We expect a little more than the monotony; we are going to visit a place where Hemingway spent his days writing part of a great American novel, where he had married a woman and lived with her. There has to be a bit of excitement in the air, some hullabaloo. Balloons flying in the sky. Roadside marquees guiding those who are making the pilgrimage. Some sort of fair in progress, glasses raised, "Cheers!" heard from a mile away.

"Look," I say, getting out of the car in the parking lot. "This is the place." As if I've known this place for long, intimately. Of course, this is the place. The GPS has led us here. We have seen the pictures of the barn and the Pfeiffer house. Any dimwit would be able to tell that this is the place. But I don't know where my preposterous proclamation comes from. I feel I've got the right to claim that I know this place.

As Phil Cousineau writes in his book *The Art of Pilgrimage: A Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred*, pilgrimage is "a powerful metaphor for any journey with the purpose of finding something that matters deeply to the traveler." It's "a way to prove your faith and find answers to your deepest

questions.” This trip has become my pilgrimage and an effort to revisit my past where my teacher and Hemingway and Santiago existed as one, and I feel that I know that old man intimately. And I know where Hemingway lived and I know where he wrote part of the book that my teacher so lovingly discussed even though he was not particularly teaching it.

After the museum official gives us a tour, I tell my son and Rita, “These stairs. See? Hemingway climbed these stairs.” My son exclaims, “Wow.” I know my eight-year-old is playing a good son. But that’s not the point. I say, “This room. Look at this desk. This typewriter. Can you believe this? Wow!”

The trip ends giving me a sense of accomplishment of a task that was long overdue. Even though Hemingway was always revered, I never thought of him as a writer I would ever attempt to emulate, maybe primarily due to fear. I was alarmed by the idea that it was hard to write simple, because I didn’t understand what it meant. When I read V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* afterward, I felt I’d found my writer. Hemingway mostly got stuck in Gunjeshwori Sir’s representation of him and Santiago. But now I feel a new affinity with the great novelist. Gunjeshwori Sir is gone, and what remains of him is what I can find in Hemingway’s work that he related to us with great reverence, so many years ago. ▲▼▲

Long Standing

by Jianqing Zheng

After William Ferris’s *Amanda Gordon*, *Rose Hill Church*

The old woman in her Sunday best
stands on the church porch:

a white dress, a pearl necklace,
a blue handbag in her left hand,
a straw hat adorned with white flowers.

As calm as the land
under the Mississippi sun,
she looks like a weathered totem pole.

Her walking cane,
almost invisible by her dress,
reveals her inner strength:

washing clothes in a tin basin
in front of her shanty
which has resisted to fall
in the storms of hard times. ▲▼▲