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## Research Article

# Analyzing the Binary Deconstruction of the Character Santiago (E. Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea) from the Perspective of Mahayana Buddhism's Concept of Emptiness

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## ABSTRACT

The article applies Jacques Derrida's binary deconstruction to the concept of Emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism to approach "The Old Man and the Sea" (E. Hemingway) and analyze the character of Santiago. The article uses semiotic research methods, discourse analysis, and poetics to propose a model, methodology, and application of that methodology to deconstruct the binary character structure in Hemingway's novel, specifically identifying opposing pairs, and construction techniques, and analyzing the manifestation of the deconstructed structure. From there, it suggests a new direction for Western literary text interpretation from an Eastern perspective.

## 1. Introduction

The work that assisted E. Hemingway in receiving Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954, *The Old Man and the Sea*, has become a world-renowned masterpiece that has been extensively studied. However, there are still many issues surrounding the character of Santiago and Hemingway's writing style, famously referred to as the "iceberg theory." These issues continue to provoke and reveal many aspects of contemporary life. Therefore, analyzing the character of Santiago through the lens of binary destruction analysis and the Buddhist concept of emptiness may provide a means to resolve conflicts concerning the perception of the character and the self from a realistic perspective.

## 2. An introduction to the binary destruction analysis perspective, the Mahayana Buddhist concept of emptiness, and Santiago

The binary deconstruction is a viewpoint of postmodernism that is prevalent in the works of Jacques Derrida when considering Western philosophical traditions that resist fixed systems and open up possibilities for "*it is necessary beginning to think without a center*" (Derrida, 1978, 280). The perspective that "*writing is never simply supplementary*" (Derrida, 1978, 7) places words on an equal footing with writing, rejecting the differentiation of F.D. Saussure. Derrida dismantled the binary system of Western metaphysical philosophy, leading to the repositioning of elements and blurring of boundaries. The deconstructive viewpoint of Jacques Derrida has a strong impact on the reception, critique, and analysis of literary texts, such as that of Nurul Hadi (in *Deconstruction Of Main Character In The Kate Dicamillo's Novel "Miraculous Journey Of Edward Tulane"*, 2017), Femilia Bowta and Yulan Puluhulawa (in *Deconstructive Analysis Of Main Character In Frankenstein Novel By Mery Shelley*, 2018), Christine Aprilia and Tomi Arianto (in *Binary Oppositions As The Result Of Deconstruction Analysis In The Goldfinch Novel By Donna Tartt*, 2021). In general, authors employ the method of data analysis (gathering data from texts, classifying them into binary oppositions, and analyzing the data to answer research questions, thereby concluding the research issue). The binary deconstruction in these works mainly reveals that characters are constructed with a tendency towards multiplicity - not fixed and purely homogeneous, corresponding to humans in real life. Thus, these actions mainly revolve around character analysis, but it seems that only the manifestations are described without discussing the methods of constructing characters in the binary deconstruction trend. In addition, determining the binary oppositions is not based on a specific criterion; the model and method of deconstruction are not very clear.

As the center of *The Old Man and the Sea*, the character of Santiago has often been studied as a symbol in works such as "The Art of Hemingway's Fiction" (*Literary Journal*, Issue 2, 1985) and "The Interpretation of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* from a Psychoanalytic Perspective" by Carl Jung (Lenka Marakova, 2011). Besides, the topic "Approaches to *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway" by Nguyen Thi Hai Yen (2014) presented three approaches: realism, fairy tale, and myth. The article "Some Iconic Images in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*" (Han Thi Bich Ngoc, 2021), or "The Image of the Old Man in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Salt in the Forest* by Nguyen Huy Thiep from a Comparative Perspective" (Nguyen Thi Hai Phuong and Pham Thi My, *Journal of Science*,

Hanoi National University of Education, Issue 64, 2019), are further research of Santiago. Overall, Santiago represents the American dream, a hero figure, with an Eastern mythical shadow. However, some opinions suggest that Santiago is an allegory for a homosexual male figure, and his relationship with Manolin tends to be male-sexual in nature. Therefore, a new perspective that can address the gender boundary is necessary to approach this character more closely and more contemporarily.

"Emptiness" or "Sunyata" is a central concept in Mahayana Buddhism. "Emptiness" does not mean non-existence, but rather the lack of inherent and independent nature of all objects and phenomena. Everything is interdependent and interrelated. "Emptiness" has no fixed boundaries or limits, it exists everywhere and is not affected by time and space. It can be seen as a subtle and elevated state, beyond ordinary concepts. From a practical perspective, it is realized through the understanding of impermanence (Anicca), non-self (Anatta), and dependent origination (Pratītyasamutpāda). "Impermanence" refers to the fact that everything is constantly changing and nothing exists permanently. "Non-self" means that there is no fixed essence, no independent entity, and no separate existence. Everything exists in relation to each other. "Dependent origination" refers to the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things, everything arises and exists based on conditions and cannot stand independently. These three concepts together form the view of the emptiness of all things in the world. It emphasizes the temporary, non-linear, and non-independent nature of all objects in the universe. Although there have been many studies on the theory of "Emptiness" and its application in daily life, its application in literary studies seems to be limited due to the theoretical nature of the object. However, it may be useful to understand it as a tool - a perspective that is frequently mentioned in Mahayana Buddhism. From a literary perspective, this is a way to incorporate a universal view into artistic literature. The challenge is to identify its value and clarify the object of study.

### 3. The research methods serve as a cultural bridge between the East and the West

This research topic was conducted through three methods, including discourse analysis, semiotics, and poetics.

Firstly, from *The Order of Discourse* (1970) to *Politics – Philosophy – Culture: Interview and Other Writings 1977 – 1984* (1990), Foucault argued that discourse is expressed through language, i.e. the way of expressing ideas, viewpoints, and history of human beings. Discourse is closely related to forms of knowledge and power, creating mechanisms and regulations, having intertextuality, unity, and practicality. From discourse, culture and social thought in a particular period can be demonstrated; and because of its openness, a discourse can be created and reproduced. Discourses are not immutable but change along with power mechanisms. The process of **discourse analysis methodology** applied to the article is as follows:

Identify discourse	→	The regulatory power of discourse	→	The way of reproducing the discourse	→	The value of deconstructing structures aiming towards Emptiness.
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Table 1. The process of applying discourse analysis methodology

Hence, discourses with normative implications in texts are identified and analyzed to clarify their influence on the social group they are directed towards, such as Santiago's special

bond with Manolin through words and actions of affection. These discourses are then identified and analyzed for how they can be reconfigured as a reaction against old norms, towards a new perspective in the spirit of the Buddhist notion of Emptiness, seeking a way out for modern society. Through this method, the conflicts between the soul and the self are resolved through spiritual awakening.

Secondly, the **semiotic method** is applied to interpret prominent symbols such as the swordfish, shark, sea, and lion pride from a psychological perspective. Semiotics studies sign in social communication, focusing on the method of creating meaning and the meaning contained in the signs. The objects of semiotics include language (language as a special sign system, according to Saussure) and non-linguistic elements (such as gestures, clothing, etc.). Therefore, applying the semiotic method to analyze a work, the sign systems of language and non-language elements in the text are identified, interpreting the artistic form, and meaning produced by these signs. Regarding language sign systems, this method pays attention to the selection and organization of words, the use of artistic techniques, and the communication between the author and the reader. The process of applying semiotic methods to a text is as follows:

Text	→	Symbols (language - non-language)	→	Selection methods, application techniques, meanings
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Table 2. Process of applying semiotic analysis method

Therefore, E. Hemingway's Iceberg Principle is explained as a semiotic artistic technique. In terms of non-linguistic signs (such as body language), the article also emphasizes the selection of signs and the cultural meanings that signs can symbolize. Communication takes place within the system of characters and between the author and the reader, much like how the writer uses images of lions, oceans, and other symbols in their work.

Finally, in the spirit of interdisciplinary approaches (literature, religion, culture), the topic applies the **method of poetic** analysis to explore the principles that make up artistic worlds that are different from reality. This begins with artistic concepts, followed by forms of characters, space, time, event types, plot, and finally, the structure and language of the text. The linguistic form embodies the writer's entire perspective and the above-mentioned aspects of the artistic world. The process of applying the method of poetic analysis to the article is as follows:

Techniques for deconstructing character structures	→	analyzing expressions in unity	→	Effect
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Table 3. The process of applying the poetic analysis method to this study

As a result, the elements of the artistic text are systematized and associated with the aesthetic impression and depth of the artistic work.

From the three research methods above, the research model of this topic can be summarized as follows:

	Researched aspects	Research Methods		
The binary deconstruction of the character	Emptiness: essence – words and thoughts: symbols (symbols)	Semiotics method	Impermanence	Emptiness
	Nature; no distinction between men and women	Poetic method	Non-self	
	Original monism: soul–being	Discourse analysis	Dependent origination	

Table 4. Thesis research model

Hence, isolations of speech, language, and writing are seen as symbols with endless potential for development based on transcendent meanings. The masculine power of the character Santiago in the work is reconciled with nature under the legendary model of selflessness. Santiago's struggling relationship with objects such as sharks and swordfish is regarded as a metaphor for the close correlation between humans and society, soul and self in the realm of dependent origination.

#### 4. Result and Discussion

##### **The research results of receiving the character Santiago from the perspective of binary destruction based on the emptiness viewpoint of Mahayana Buddhism**

This article draws two conclusions regarding the manifestation and expression of the binary destruction of the concept of Emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism in the character of Santiago according to the following model:

The results of receiving the character of Santiago from the perspective of the binary destruction of Emptiness in Mahayana Buddhism.		
Binary deconstruction representation	The way to show binary deconstruction representation	binary deconstruction viewpoint
Impermanence	Legendary character	The dynamics of research methods and life
Non-self	Iceberg Principle	A new look into research and life
Dependent origination	The genre of short Fiction	Prescribing and combining methods and perspectives

Table 5. Result of researching the topic

4.1. The representation of the binary destruction of characters is manifested through three aspects: impermanence, selflessness, and dependent origination.

4.1.1. Impermanence expresses the nature of instability in speech and thought, even in stable crystallizations such as symbols. Objects and phenomena change in the cycle of *"birth, existence, decay, and extinction"*. Impermanence means that there is nothing that persists, only continuous change and movement. Santiago is in the second or third stage, gradually becoming helpless and losing his strong past. 84 days and nights have passed and cannot be regained, and the element of impermanence appears and operates in the events and Santiago's life. Of course, this does not negate the positive aspect of the motto: *"Keep your head clear and know how to suffer like a man"* (Hemingway, 1952, 102). In Santiago's view, everything is interdependent due to impermanence; he sets sail and sees the beauty of the vast ocean and the swordfish. As a result, the sea, birds, swordfish, and even the thoughts of Santiago, at any moment, bring him experiences in the journey of human struggle with nature and the concepts of victory, failure, achievements, and experiences, etc. all of which are "Nothingness" and constantly flowing. Therefore, the shark is no longer an obstacle, and the swordfish is no longer an achievement. At last, the old man returns empty-handed, and reality constantly flows into his dreams. The guest points to the swordfish bones and asks what it is, the waiter replies *"Eshark"* (E. Hemingway, 1952, 139), the strange guest thinks it is a shark bone and praises it; no one explains anything further. The owner of the bone sinks into a dream. The last paragraph of the work emphasizes the nature of meaninglessness and the elimination of language. With the development of the concept of "Nothingness" in Mahayana Buddhism, the state of silence will lead to the corresponding concept of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) which corresponds to the ultimate truth, called the state in which language also ends - In the *Diamond Sutra*: *"Since I attained Perfect Enlightenment, I have not uttered a word. It is neither that I have spoken, nor that I have not spoken."* (Thich Duy Luc, 2006, 136). Therefore, in "Nothingness", the contradiction between speech and thought is manifested, and this relationship develops into multiple layers of signs and symbols but also cannot escape the realm of speculation and impermanence. However, Santiago still stands out as an indestructible symbol of faith and beauty; "Nothingness" is not without essence, but rather lacks self-reliance and stability; it is selflessness.

4.1.2. Selflessness is an important perspective of Mahayana Buddhism that breaks down the binary gender categorization in evaluating and studying characters. Selflessness does not mean the non-existence of any reality such as the self or humans, but the non-existence of the self and the non-existence of everything. Until now, studies have affirmed the masculine power of the old man Santiago and the feminine expression of the sea. However, from the perspective of selflessness, Santiago always operates tirelessly, from a famous fisherman to a failed old man, from an admirer to a killer of swordfish, and from a great failure to great spiritual success. In that sense, swordfish and sharks also undergo transformation. However, the male-female opposition seems to have not been resolved until now. Hemingway himself once interwove the detail that young people call the sea *"El mar"* as an enemy, while the old man calls the sea *"La mar"* as a woman. *"He always thought of the sea as la mar which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her ... Some of the younger fishermen, ..., spoke of her as el mar which is masculine."* (E. Hemingway, 1952, 32). This not only stems from culture and language but also from the way of looking and feeling the world in binary destruction. The sea as a woman is a metaphor for the unpredictability of nature, for the state of uncertainty of nature, and everything, that is, without a self. Santiago has never been seen with a woman, only accompanied by Manolin - a young boy - a homosexual male object in Western history. Santiago is also proud of his fishing ability as how gay men are proud of their gender to resist social



pressure. In fact, Santiago's connection with women is not blurred, or rather, he is directed towards femininity, that is, the sea. The character evaluation limit must be extended to the natural dimension. Therefore, in the personal sphere, gender differentiation for Santiago becomes no longer appropriate because he has already transcended his own self. In the realm of human relations, Santiago represents the power of humans over nature, but this power also inclines towards harmony, erasing the self of humanity, and towards harmony rather than resistance, mastering nature according to Western traditions.

4.1.3. Dependent origination can be seen as a point of research on the cyclical harmony of all things. In the broadest sense of the concept of "Emptiness" in Buddhism, the twelve causes and conditions and all phenomena are undifferentiated and continuously interacting, changing each other. The result is that the differentiation of the soul-essence becomes limited and outdated. In order to survive and fight against the swordfish, Santiago had to eat the dorado fish even though he did not want to. Everything that happens in this world is due to dependent origination, and the end of one living being can also be the beginning of another. The journey of Santiago will continue and transform into the journey of Manolin, in which the sea creatures also constantly transforming. Returning to reality, the lives of all things are the same way, with opposing relationships such as life – death, strength – weakness, success – failure existing within a certain limit, and ultimately not being the essence. Therefore, the soul and the essence are actually the same, having the same source, so Santiago does not feel lonely at sea. Saddharma Puṇḍarīka says: *"All dharmas are imagined, resembling the Buddha's birth through causation. Therefore, it is said to be the One True Doctrine."* (Thich Thanh Tu, 2009, 112). All causal dharmas are hypothetical, without self-nature, not fixed, and born through causation. Understanding this, success only has meaning with experiencing failure, and light only exists when there is darkness. Santiago can only return after leaving, and can only achieve results by giving up everything, which from an ordinary perspective is a failure. But from the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism, it is an understanding of the nature of "emptiness" in this world. Because wisdom is inherently inseparable from imagination: *"Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form. The form is exactly emptiness, emptiness is exactly the form; sensation, perception, volition, and consciousness are also like this."* (Heart Sutra) (Thich Duy Luc, 2010, 45). All harmonize towards one source, which is the Mind, the way of seeing, the way of feeling of Santiago towards everything. From this perspective, whether the shark symbolizes the bourgeoisie who exploits the fruits of the labor of the working people or not, it is still beautiful in its own way and has a certain role in the process of life. Therefore, Santiago does not hate or blame anything because he cannot measure or think about the meaning of destiny with human intelligence.

4.2. Literary studies not only describe what is good in work but also must indicate how good work is created, in order to produce that excellence. Therefore, the way of expressing the binary destruction of characters through the innovation of artistic perspective is crucial in literary analysis.

4.2.1. The non-self perspective alters the idea of character and the scope of the character in modern novels. The modern novel breaks away from the stable concepts of image and character of folk literature. For Santiago, this is a character that carries many traces of Christian culture. First of all, the main character of the story is old man Santiago, a skilled fisherman and a devout Christian. He often prays and reads the Bible before setting out to sea, using stories from the Bible to cope with challenges. Hemingway's way of describing the character is also heavily influenced by the mythology of the Bible. For example, Santiago's cry

when encountering a shark recalls Jesus' crucifixion: "...it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood." (E. Hemingway, 1952, 119). After returning from his fishing trip, Santiago carried the sail as if Jesus carried the cross and when he returned to his hut, his posture was reminiscent of Jesus on the cross. He was also admired and then betrayed like Jesus. But Santiago completely struggled with the indifferent nature alone without the intervention of God or the church. The final big fish is not a reward or affirmation of the happy ending of a Christian sheep, but a failure and weakness of a human being, even though he lived as a saint. Santiago - his name - speaks to that. Perhaps Santiago was built in the spirit of the middle way, the Madhyama-mārga between two opposing poles. It is a state of perception and action that cultivates autonomy, concentration, perseverance, and expenditure of effort and time to achieve liberation and happiness. Therefore, starting from cultural, social, and linguistic opposites, through allegory and association, Santiago's character is built on the principles of similarity and similarity of myths that have magic with 3 characteristics of will, dream, and strength. Santiago has strong willpower, and physical strength, like Pan Gu who created heaven and earth in Chinese mythology, like the creator spirits of the world who used their bodies to create the earth. Santiago carries the universal dream and psychology of human beings about existence and his relationship with nature. He belongs to the category of cultural heroes, Western knights, and Eastern occupational ancestors. Lastly, Santiago synthesizes his primitive power. The separation of him into masculine and feminine directions and the sea is outdated. Because he and the sea are one (his eyes are the same color as the sea), *"Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated."* (E. Hemingway, 1952, 10). In ancient mythology, primitive deities were not gendered, as exemplified by the likes of Atum in Egypt and Brahma in India. Their lack of gender allowed for great creative power. Later deities, such as Zeus and Hermaphroditus, were also genderless.

4.2.2. In the impermanence sense, the content and form of artistic works, particularly Hemingway's Iceberg principle, also carry new meanings. The Iceberg principle is Hemingway's writing technique, in which he shows readers only a small part of what is happening, while most of it is hidden and only implied through visual details, gestures, actions, etc. These implied details allow readers to read and contemplate with the author, such as the swordfish and shark characters or the fierce scenes of the sea. From a content perspective, many studies suggest that this principle is reflected in short, adjective-free sentences, yet the work itself still has long, descriptive sentences with adjectives. Some explain this principle as a hidden meaning, but, it always moves through various aspects of the writer's and reader's perception. The essence of the work is always changing through different ways of reading and the reader. It is present everywhere but disappears as soon as one thinks they have grasped it in the palm of their hand. It shares the same essence as the Nirvana of Mahayana Buddhism; not an end to suffering but the state of not attaining or abandoning mentioned in the Diamond Sutra: *"Subdue all kinds of beings with that enormous quantity, but in reality, no beings have been subdued."* (Thich Duy Luc, 2010, 10)

4.2.3. The concept of dependent origination can shed light on the structure of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* which is considered a novella. However, sometimes it is also referred to as a short story because it is shorter than typical novels. The genre of a novella usually ranges from about 20,000 to 50,000 words, while *The Old Man and the Sea* is only about 27,000 words. In fact, the distinction between a novel and a short story does not necessarily lie in the length, but in the author's way of describing the world and



characters. A novel often depicts the process of a character's life and development, while a short story only shows a snapshot of life. Santiago certainly has a complex psychological process, but due to the concise narrative style, this process is transformed into action, encapsulated within a few days. In just a few days, however, the character shows a different perspective on the world. This state comes very close to nothingness, surpassing all negation and cannot be described. Emptiness is nothing, but it exists in everything; it stands between being and non-being; between having and not having. This is the state of perception and experience, understanding of Santiago and the reader.

4.3. Through the lens of binary destruction analysis of the character Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, the dynamic of research methodology and life, new perspectives in research and life, regulation, and integration of methods and perspectives, have continuously been reformed to break psychological limitations. Thus, there is a more diverse view of science and reality because the phenomena with "Emptiness" properties can be replaced and intertwined like Santiago and the swordfish, sharks all searching for objects for their own journeys; they are all characters on a journey to find themselves. Moreover, Manolin is the image of both the past and the future of Santiago. From the auspicious meaning, the trace of Jesus through the details describing Santiago is not hesitant to approach this character from a Buddhist perspective. In that sense, Santiago, like Buddha, abandoned all peace on the mainland with their golden past and went to the sea to accept the challenge of finding the truth, then returning after reaching the other side of wisdom. That is the "paragate" (gone beyond) in the meaning of the *Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra*. Finally, Santiago, like Buddha or Jesus, from a few initial disciples, their image and lessons were revered by the whole world, but they departed with a specific "Emptiness" state, simple and closest to the truth. From a research perspective, impermanence and non-self suggest the need to combine research methods with each other because methods can be replaced and changed over time. From a life perspective, understanding "Emptiness" can help us escape the entanglement and constraints of life, gaining spiritual freedom and happiness by overcoming the obsession with materialism, negative emotions, illness, and death. Santiago is alone at sea, but he is never worried. Similarly, the vast sea is life, and each person must perform Santiago's journey, where the starting and ending points are determined, but the issue is how each person's journey will differ.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, this article presents three aspects of applying the binary destruction analysis perspective to the character of Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* through the characteristic of "Nothingness" in Buddhist development, including non-self, impermanence, and dependent origination. In this process, opposing pairs such as thought-speech, male-female, and mind-body are eliminated and concentrated into a unified characteristic of "Emptiness". The nature of this "Emptiness" is rich, diverse, and transcends all boundaries, allowing for an understanding and evaluation of the character of Santiago and an examination of the construction of this character. Therefore, this article has three important meanings, including a new scientific perspective/ approach, and practical contributions to deconstruct and support the strong yet vulnerable "self" (humans), especially in the context of pandemics and natural disasters. Finally, this article can also contribute an alternative perspective to avoid the excessive heroization of Santiago. Furthermore, applying the concept of "Emptiness" in life can help us better understand the world around us and accept the unavoidable truths of life. This

can lead us to live a better and more self-sufficient life and have more opportunities to help others. This is the most significant educational value of this topic. In the realm of non-self, impermanence, and dependent origination, the achievement of Santiago may be small, but his influence is significant. The value of this article is not everlasting and may not reach its peak, but with a combined awareness and transformation of methods, it is hoped that it can open up positive dialogues, even in the opposite aspects of culture, ideology, and consciousness.

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