ERNEST HEMMINGWAY’S STYLE OF WRITING:

Hemingway's writing style owes much to his career as a journalist. His use of language — so different from that of, say, his contemporary William Faulkner — is immediately identifiable by most readers. Short words, straightforward sentence structures, vivid descriptions, and factual details combine to create an almost transparent medium for his engaging and realistic stories. Yet without calling attention to itself, the language also resonates with complex emotions and larger and larger meanings — displaying the writer's skill in his use of such subtle techniques as sophisticated patterns; repeated images, allusions, and themes; repeated sounds, rhythms, words, and sentence structures; indirect revelation of historical fact; and blended narrative modes.

In The Old Man and the Sea, nearly every word and phrase points to Hemingway's Santiago-like dedication to craft and devotion to precision. Hemingway himself claimed that he wrote on the "principle of the iceberg," meaning that "seven-eighths" of the story lay below the surface parts that show. While the writing in The Old Man and the Sea reflects Hemingway's efforts to pare down language and convey as much as possible in as few words as possible, the novella's meanings resonate on a larger and larger scale. The story's brevity, ostensibly simple plot, and distance from much of this period's political affairs all lend the novella a simplistic quality that is as deceptive as it is endearing.

For example, Hemingway conveys one of the novella's central themes by repeatedly yoking religious conviction with a belief in luck. These repeated images and allusions, juxtaposed so often, suggest more than an appropriate sketch of Cuba's Catholic culture, affection for games of chance, and passion for baseball. Both religion and luck rely on ritual and have the power to engender the hope, dreams, faith, absorption, and resolution that ultimately take people beyond themselves. Supporting these repeated images and allusions is the repetition of certain rhythms and sentence structures that signal a kind of ritual or catechism in, for example, the conversations between Santiago and Manolin or the description of Santiago's precise actions in his fishing or in laying out the fish that will nourish him.

Hemingway the journalist also relies on resonances from historical and factual references to enrich the story and advance its themes — a technique used by T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. For example, the novella's many baseball references enabled critics such as C. Harold Hurley and Bickford Sylvester to determine the exact dates in September when the story takes place; to infer a great deal about Cuba's cultural, economic, and social circumstances at the time; and to establish Manolin's exact age. These references do more than provide background information, establish the story's cultural context, and advance the plot. These references also indirectly reveal the characters' motivation, inform the dialogue, and uncover the story's integral thematic dimensions.

Hemingway also relies on blending narrative modes to achieve a shifting psychic distance. The story begins and ends with a third-person, omniscient narration that doesn't dip into Santiago's thoughts. The two parts of the story that take place on land benefit from this controlled reporting. For example, the poignancy of Santiago's circumstances at the story's beginning and the tragedy of his defeat at the story's end are not lost on readers, but instead resonate within them without melodrama because of this psychic distance. On the other hand, the part of the story that takes place at sea draws closer to Santiago's perspective by letting him talk to himself, by presenting a third-person narration of his thoughts, or by drifting subtly from either of these methods into a kind of interior monologue or limited stream of consciousness. This perspective is essential to the story's middle part at sea, which is an odyssey into the natural world, a coming to grips with the natural order, an acceptance of the inevitable cycle of life, and a redemption of the individual's existence. As the transition into Santiago's thoughts seems logical and intuitive because he is alone at sea, with no one to talk to, so does the transition back out again because he returns to land so deeply exhausted.