



RESISTANCE: “A MARK OF RESISTANCE” VERSUS *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA*

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ABSTRACT: One of the most influential American poets, Adrienne Rich, is widely known for her powerful writings on feminism, identity, social justice, and so on. Her poetry reflects deep concern for women's rights, freedom of expression, and resistance against oppression. Rich's poetry provides a chronicle of the evolving consciousness of the modern woman. One of her famous poems, “A Mark of Resistance,” focuses on a mark or sign of resistance. Similarly, in Ernest Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago's struggle is portrayed as a metaphor for human endurance. Both the poem and the novella focus on the themes of resistance, endurance, and human resilience. This work portrays how the poem and the novella show the struggle of individuals against forces that attempt to overpower them.

Keywords – Resistance, Santiago, oppression, mark.

INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich, a widely known American poet, is known for her feminist writings. Through her poetry, she gives voice to the marginalized and the silenced. Adrienne Rich's poem “A Mark of Resistance” is a symbolic poem about enduring defiance against societal oppression, using a cairn as a mark or sign of resistance. The poem is a contemplative piece that reflects on the act of building a cairn—a stone pile often used as a landmark or memorial.

The speaker describes the physical and emotional labour involved in this task, set against a backdrop of impending environmental change. Thus, it is a concise yet powerful expression of quiet defiance and endurance in the face of external pressures, including oppression and societal expectations. Rich uses this poem to support people who face discrimination and other injustices in society. The central idea revolves around creating a symbolic ‘mark’ that stands as a form of resistance to the forces that seek to erase individuality, creativity, and freedom.

While Rich focuses on the social defiance against cultural flattening, Ernest Hemingway centers on physical endurance against the indifference of nature. The novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*, conveys the profound theme that while man can face destruction, he can never truly be defeated. Santiago's relentless struggle against the forces of nature symbolizes human perseverance, resilience, and dignity in the face of inevitable suffering. In *Modern Critical Interpretations*, Harold Bloom suggests that Hemingway uses symbolism to enhance the themes of perseverance, struggle, and man's relationship with nature.

MARK:

“A Mark of Resistance” uses the cairn or pile of stones as a metaphor for creating a lasting, tangible mark of resistance. The act of piling stones is both a physical and symbolic effort. Rich employs this act of piling stones to represent a conscious, physical effort to challenge the forces of destruction. The cairn, though a literal pile of stones, gains symbolic weight through the language of the poem. The words provide it with significance beyond its physical form, transforming it into a symbol of resistance and a marker of the speaker’s values and intentions.

The mark becomes evidence of survival and refusal to surrender, symbolizing the voices of individuals who continue resisting injustice despite pain and isolation. The poem serves as a ‘mark’ or sign of defiance, suggesting that individual and persistent action matter, even against the large, oppressive forces. The mark becomes a symbol of the scars left by oppression as well as the courage to fight against them. The act of resistance becomes an act of survival and identity.

Both texts present the resilience of the human spirit in the face of suffering and adversity. For Santiago, the mark refers to the physical toll on his body, such as the scars on his hands and the skeleton of the marlin. Harold Bloom argues that Santiago’s journey was Hemingway’s most allegorical work, portraying his struggle as a metaphor for human endurance. Santiago’s bleeding hands, wounded from his long struggle with the marlin, resemble Christ’s crucifixion wounds. After his arduous journey, he carries his mast like a cross and collapses in his shack, much like Christ on the way to Calvary. This religious imagery emphasizes that Santiago’s ordeal was more than a personal struggle—it is a universal story of sacrifice and redemption.

PERSISTENCE:

In Adrienne Rich’s poem, the mark symbolizes scars that are not signs of defeat, but symbols of strength and persistence. Rich also connects persistence with identity and voice. The poem suggests that even when individuals are marginalized or silenced, they preserve their dignity by continuing to question and speak. The poet uses dryness and exhaustion to depict the harsh realities faced by marginalized people, especially women.

The emotional and psychological burden of continuous struggle results in fatigue that comes from resisting oppression, injustice, and silence for a long period of time. The speaker acknowledges the survivors’ vulnerability and the futility of their efforts in the face of inevitable natural disasters, like floods. The cairn—piling stones—while an act of preservation, signifies something that has never existed before, implying uniqueness. The stones are “painfully assembled,” showing that the act of resistance involves suffering. The speaker is not merely preserving the past. She is inventing a new form of meaning. Her act is both memorial and creative. The speaker’s love for the land is evident, but there is also a sense of resignation about their inability to prevent its potential destruction, reflecting a deeper emotional connection and a desire to leave even a small mark on a world that seems beyond their control.

On the other hand, in Hemingway’s novella, Santiago is a fisherman who has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish. However, despite this unlucky period, he decides to venture further into the sea and struggles with a giant marlin for days. Despite bleeding hands and other physical strain, he refuses to let go, considering the marlin a worthy opponent. The marlin, thus, embodies Santiago’s pride and determination, as he refuses to let go despite exhaustion and suffering.

RESISTANCE:

In “A Mark of Resistance,” Rich writes against patriarchy, silence, injustice, and systems that suppress individuality and freedom. The mark becomes a symbol of the scars left by oppression as well as the courage to fight against them. The act of resistance becomes an act of survival and identity. While both texts portray the struggle of individuals against forces that attempt to overpower them, Rich suggests that resistance does not always mean victory. It may mean witness.

In this poem, resistance is not presented merely as an act of rebellion against external forces but also as an internal struggle to preserve one’s dignity and identity in a world shaped by inequality and suppression. Through vivid imagery, Rich portrays resistance as necessary for survival and transformation. Connecting resistance with identity, Rich shows that individuals who resist often carry emotional and psychological scars, therefore, becoming an act of self-preservation. Rich portrays this resistance as an empowerment, symbolized through the physical act of piling stones, which in turn becomes an act of asserting one’s identity in a world that often seeks to diminish it. The poem’s closing lines reinforce the idea that resistance can take different forms—sometimes, just existing with quiet dignity is an act of defiance against oppressive forces.

In Hemingway’s novella, Santiago struggles against the powerful forces of nature. His battle with the marlin symbolizes human resistance against overwhelming odds. Again, the sharks represent the forces of nature and society that erode human achievement. Santiago muses, “A man can be destroyed but not defeated.” This shows his resistance against all odds. Hemingway’s portrayal of Santiago’s relentless fight against the sharks reinforces the novella’s central theme of perseverance despite inevitable defeat.

CONCLUSION

The poem advocates for small but meaningful acts of rebellion, highlighting how even seemingly simple acts of defiance can resonate deeply, serving as reminders of human strength and the refusal to conform to oppressive forces. Highlighting the idea that resistance does not always have to be aggressive, the poem portrays that it can also be found in small acts of affirmation and perseverance. This shows how women or marginalized groups can also assert their presence without resorting to violence. The final line, “A mark of resistance, a sign,” completes the transformation of matter into meaning. The cairn becomes a sign against erasure.

It is the mark of ‘resistance,’ a refusal to comply with the conventional norms of society. The poem uses language to navigate and articulate the complexities of human emotion, resistance, and the quest for meaning in the face of inevitable change. In the poem, the speaker’s hands create something that may outlast personal vulnerability. Rich suggests that even a small physical act or a simple ‘mark’ can become morally powerful when the intention matters. Both the poem and the novella portray the courage of human beings in difficult circumstances.

Throughout *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago dreams of lions on African beaches, which symbolize his lost vigour, the joys of his younger days, and his undying spirit. Even after losing the marlin, he dreams of the lions, proving that his determination remains intact despite his physical suffering. His spirit, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, endures beyond his physical suffering. Through Santiago’s character, Hemingway crafted a story of perseverance, dignity, and resilience.

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