

To Every Thing There Is A Season

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“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.” This timeless opening line of chapter 3 of the Book of Ecclesiastes introduces the idea that life is dynamic, full of shifting and often contrasting forces, events and personalities. That is nowhere more evident than out at sea, away from civilized life, where sailors are tested by nature and each other in direct and often dramatic ways as in the stories of *Life of Pi*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and *Moby-Dick*. In these stories, it is Pi more than any other character who is able to embrace an Ecclesiastes mindset. He has the ability to accept the fundamental characteristic of life, that life is always changing and is a constant balance of opposites, while characters like the Old Man, the Ancient Mariner, and Ahab cannot so easily obtain this flexible mindset, to their detriment.

Ecclesiastes 3 explores life’s contrasting states of being by first acknowledging that there is “A time to be born, and a time to die.” A fact of life is that as human beings age, they deteriorate physically and mentally. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the reader watches the demise of Santiago as he transitions from “The Champion,” a person strong enough to defeat anyone in arm wrestling, to the “Old Man,” someone who becomes dependent on the help of a teenage boy. For the Old Man, his “death” is not physical death per se, but rather his declining physical strength makes it harder for him to fish independently and therefore make a living. This is why he is determined to catch the marlin in the first place, to prove to himself that he can still be successful without the help of the boy. Santiago wishes to return to the time when people called him “The Champion” rather than the “Old Man.” Through this desire to prove something, it is evident that Santiago, although wise and experienced, does not have an Ecclesiastes mindset. He is unwilling to accept the fact that he is aging and his health is declining. It is admirable that Santiago chooses to endure the pain in his body while on his fishing trip; however, at the same time, there is a natural reason for pain. By ignoring this pain, Santiago is showing that he does not accept the balance in life and the inevitable truth that one can be strong early in life, and later in life lose that strength. Rather, Santiago fights this idea as if he himself can overcome this balance and fundamental characteristic of life. Ecclesiastes is a reminder that Santiago cannot do this as there is “a time to die,” whether in a literal moment that a body ceases to function or in the figuratively speaking more drawn out aging process.

Sometimes that literal death results from a killing, about which Ecclesiastes tells us there is “A time to kill, and a time to heal.” In the *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the Mariner kills the Albatross for no apparent reason. Subsequently, the Mariner’s fellow sailors blame their bad luck at sea on the fact that the Mariner killed the Albatross, and they punish him by placing the Albatross around his neck. Therefore, the killing of the

Albatross represents a burden for which the Mariner must atone. Then one moment, quite by chance as he had no reason to know why, the Mariner is moved by the beauty of the water snakes; he “watched their rich attire: Blue, glossy green, and velvet black. They coiled and swam; and every track Was a flash of Golden fire. O happy living things!”(Coleridge 40). In that moment, when he shows love and respect for nature’s creatures, in the words of Ecclesiastes the Mariner is “heal[ed],” he is redeemed (at least momentarily), and the Albatross falls off his neck as the curse is lifted.

However, instead of taking comfort in what should have been full redemption, what follows is a series of unpleasant experiences, leaving the Mariner to believe that he was never meant to be redeemed for the sin of having killed the Albatross, and that he is forever doomed to live in a half-dead state, sharing with strangers his tale and lessons learned. The Mariner seems to force his story on the Wedding Guest as he admits his need to tell it: “That agony returns: And till my ghastly tale is told, This heart within me burns”(Coleridge 68). This obsession comes from the fact that he still hasn’t forgiven himself for killing the Albatross and is trying to make amends. The fact that his name includes the word “ancient” could hint at the fact that his guilt is timeless. In this way, by being stuck in a never-ending redemption mission, the Mariner does not exhibit an Ecclesiastes mindset that recognizes when it is time to move on to the next stage of life.

In contrast to the Mariner’s inability to move on from difficult circumstances, in *Life of Pi*, the main character is a more flexible thinker. Pi embodies the advice in Ecclesiastes that there is “a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.” This line epitomizes Pi’s evolving relationship with the tiger Richard Parker. At the beginning of the movie, Pi is curious about Richard Parker, though he quickly learns that he is a vicious beast, perhaps not so surprising because his name comes from the root “ric,” meaning ruler. Indeed, Pi’s fear and a desire to distance himself from the tiger is what ends up keeping him alive once he is stranded at sea. This unlikely reality eventually turns into gratitude and care that Pi feels for the tiger. This is evident when Richard Parker is at the mercy of Pi to get back on the lifeboat. Pi is not obligated to help the tiger, nor would it improve his own chances of surviving if the tiger survived; yet, he does it anyway because he feels connected to Richard Parker who, after all, enjoys a civilized human name. The bond that Pi and the tiger have comes from their shared suffering while out on sea and although there was once a time where Pi needed to “not embrace” (to borrow a line from Ecclesiastes) Richard Parker in order to remain safe, there also came a time where he needed to embrace Richard Parker in order to survive at sea. Thus, Pi is able to live by the words of the Ecclesiastes as he is willing to accept balance between opposites in life.

The lesson of there being a time to both embrace and not embrace also describes the Old Man’s relationship with the boy in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Initially, the Old Man detaches himself from the boy as he realizes he is unlucky and he wants the boy to succeed, whether that be with or without him. However, once on his journey the Old Man

repeatedly states “I wish the boy were here.”(Hemingway 56). This Old Man’s dependence on the boy is also evident through both characters’ names. The boy’s name is Manolin, a nickname for Emmanuel, meaning “God is with us”; therefore, Manolin can be seen as a Jesus-like figure. At the same time, the Old Man’s name is Santiago, an allusion to Saint James. Like Santiago, Saint James was a fisherman himself until he met Jesus, who promised to make him a “fishers of men.” Just as Saint James embraced Jesus and became a follower, Santiago ultimately embraces, or at least acknowledges, his dependence on Manolin. In both “embracing” the boy by accepting his help, as well as “refraining from embracing” the boy by encouraging him to fish with another fisherman whose luck had not run dry like his, Santiago exhibits an Ecclesiastes mindset. Though this mindset is perhaps not as flexible as Pi since Santiago can’t accept his own declining health, the Old Man is in many ways following the lesson of Ecclesiastes.

The character least able to internalize the message of Ecclesiastes is Ahab in *Moby Dick*, who is unable to comprehend that there is indeed a season, “A time to keep, and a time to cast away.” Ahab’s sole goal in life is to kill Moby Dick. The name Ahab is a biblical allusion to the seventh king of Israel, who was known to be wicked due to his idolatrous ways. Similarly, Ahab can be compared to the king of the Pequod, where his idolatrous ways are analogous to his undying obsession to kill Moby Dick. Ahab is never willing to let this desire go and therefore risks not only his life, but the lives of the crew, for the sake of catching Moby Dick. Ishmael compares Ahab to a statue “of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini’s cast Perseus”(Melville 108). Perseus was known to be the killer of monsters, including Medusa, in Greek mythology. This is exactly how Ahab sees himself, as a defender of the human race by killing the great Moby Dick. However, unlike Perseus who lives in the domain of mythology, Ahab is living in the real world and he is not invincible. His hatred of Moby Dick and desire for revenge blinds him and is the reason why he cannot let go of his obsession to kill Moby Dick. Thus, Ahab does not have an Ecclesiastes mindset as he is not willing to acknowledge that he made a mistake in trying to go after Moby Dick, or set his life on a different course. He is emotionally stuck, filled with hatred and obsessed with killing Moby Dick no matter what, and cannot “refrain from embracing.”

In contrast to Ahab’s experience where he hates the whale and therefore feels compelled to kill it, the Old Man loves the fish yet still feels like it is necessary to kill it. “A time to love and a time to hate.” This idea of the two competing virtues of love and hate is seen through the Old Man’s relationship with the marlin that he wishes to kill. Throughout his fishing trip, the Old Man switches between calling the marlin “the fish” and my brother.” Calling the marlin “the fish” is a impersonal name that therefore shows Santiago distancing himself from nature. At the same time, Santiago also refers often to the marlin as “his brother,” and while doing so, is relating himself to the nature around him. This contrast between names for the marlin represents Santiago’s struggle with his role as a fisherman, which involves having respect and gratitude for nature, but at the same time also understanding that there is sometimes a necessity to destroy parts of nature. As the

Old Man says, “Fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive”(Hemingway 106). Overall, this example shows that the Old Man does have a Ecclesiastes mindset as he is able to both love and hate different aspects of fishing.

Maintaining mental flexibility, as the Old Man does in the preceding example and as Pi does throughout *Life of Pi*, I too can adopt a more balanced approach to life in the spirit of Ecclesiastes. The number Pi itself represents the outlook that there are some things in life one will understand (like the first million digits of the number Pi), and other things one will not understand (like Pi’s true value as the number Pi is endless). Adopting this mindset, that there will be events that I encounter that I cannot fully understand or do anything about, will help me deal with hard situations that I will inevitably encounter in my future.

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