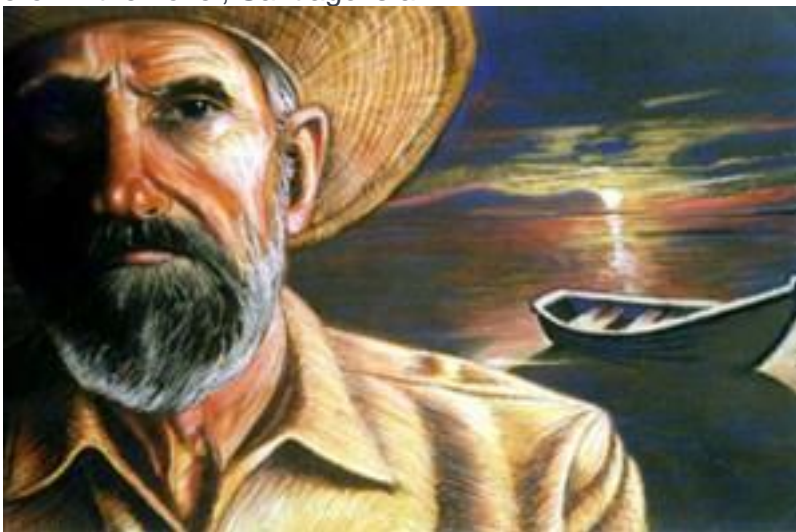


Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea: Summary & Analysis

1. Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man...

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway describes an old fisherman and the unfortunate trials he faces as his "luck" runs out. Through the novel, the fisherman, Santiago, replicates Hemingway's ideal man, a noble hero. Hemingway had a Code of Behavior that he himself followed. He had morals that were strict and an appreciation for instinct and human nature. He had a specific way of living life and an understanding of time. He believed in taking risks and acting upon instinct. He believed that a person who followed his Code of Behavior was a noble hero. In Hemingway's Code of Behavior, a noble hero is a master craftsman. This means that he is not dependent on other people or on technology. It also means that he is a master at his art and he keeps practicing it in order to better himself. The second characteristic of a noble hero is that he struggles in order to remain undefeated. This means that he does anything possible to reach his goal. He struggles and suffers in order to perfect his art and therefore, himself, "No matter what kind of suffering and trial he has to go through he has to fulfill his destiny..." (Harada 270). The third characteristic of Hemingway's noble hero is that he accepts defeat. Once he is defeated, once he can better himself no more, he should stop trying because, "He lives in time. And the goal of time is death and destruction" (Harada 276). He should accept that he is no longer useful and that he has been defeated. These three characteristics define Hemingway's ideal man.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago exemplifies Hemingway's Code of Behavior for a noble hero. In the novel, Santiago is a



master

craftsman. He is only

dependent on himself. While the other fishermen use motor boats, Santiago uses his skiff. While the other men have many workers and helpers who hold several lines,

Santiago has three lines all operated by his own hand. He is an expert, "...the old man goes much farther out than the other fishermen and casts bait in much deeper water"(Gurko 66). Because he knows the waters and the movements of the fish, he has a better chance of catching the fish. Although he is taking a greater risk by going out deeper, he has a better chance of catching the bigger fish. Another thing that makes Santiago a master craftsman is his experience. He has been a fisherman all his life. Therefore he has had much time to master this art. Though many fishermen might doubt him, he is great. He has skill and he applies it in order to succeed. He uses his hands and he uses his instincts to master the art of being a fisherman. Santiago uses himself, his physical and mental strength to catch the fish, and by doing these things, his difficult task becomes easier. He is a master craftsman not only through his skill, but also through his determination. Determination defines the second characteristic that makes Santiago a noble hero. He is determined and he struggles in order to remain undefeated. Although he has gone 84 days without catching a fish, he does not give up. He goes out on his 85th day with the mentality that this is the day when he will catch a fish. This is what keeps him going. He knows that he still has the ability and strength to be a good fisherman. He never gives up. After catching the marlin, he states, "Fish...I'll stay with you until I am dead"(52). This shows his determination to win the battle and the fish. He has fought these battles hundreds of times before, he suffered, but he won. Still this battle is different. He fights in a way he has never fought before and he suffers. He suffers in catching the fish, killing the fish, attempting to return home, and fighting off the sharks. But through all this suffering, he still fights, "... for he alone has to endure the sufferings to fulfill his destiny"(Harada 270).

This is his mentality, he knows what he must do and so, he does it. He never lets down



his guard and he fights with consistent strength. A third characteristic that makes Santiago a noble hero is that he accepts his defeat. The fish is eaten and he has returned home with its remains. He realizes that he went out too far and that he made a mistake. He fought a tough battle and in the end, he was defeated. He even admits to himself that he has been beaten. Although through most of the novel he has great strength in fighting the fish and he is determined to succeed, in the end he knows what has happened. Throughout his life he has struggled and suffered and won but this was his final battle. And though he lost, he lost with a fight. He realized now that it is over for him. He is done fighting and it doesn't matter anymore, "... he knew he was beaten now finally and without remedy"(119). He knows also, that it is his fault. He realizes his mistake and that he cannot change what has already happened. He went out too far and although this caught him the bigger fish, it also caused him failure. He says it to himself, he was careless and he was responsible for his own failure. He tried to do more than he was capable of doing. He has lost, "Only I have no luck anymore,"(32) he says. There is nothing he can do to change this. He has been defeated. "To be a hero means to dare more than other men, to expose oneself to greater dangers, and therefore more greatly risk the possibilities of defeat and death"(Gurko 66). Santiago fits this description perfectly. He dares more than other men do, and he strives for perfection. He exposes himself to dangers by going out much farther and casting bait in deeper waters. Because of this, he is able to catch the bigger fish. Yet still, the bigger fish is more

powerful and pulls the skiff even farther out to sea. This makes it an even bigger risk. Another risk he takes is that he goes all by himself. He does this in order to fulfill his destiny using only his own resources. The problem is that he has no aid. And in the case of falling overboard or getting lost at sea, there will be no one there to help him. He proves to be a noble hero in the eyes of Hemingway as well. He is a master craftsman in his enduring strength, skill, and knowledge of fishing, "Santiago determinedly bends all his strength and accrued experience in his craft to the task of playing the fish well" (Rovit 86). He knows tricks and occupies himself with bettering his ability to fish. He struggles and suffers in order to stay undefeated.

He beats all odds and fights all battles with the thought that he can and will win. And so he does. He goes far out and acts on what he thinks are right. He does not fear his actions nor does he regret them. He fights every battle as if it is his last and therefore comes out on top. Third, he accepts defeat. This is the most honorable characteristic. No matter how hard he has fought, once it is over, he does not look back wishing he could have acted differently. He accepts his mistakes and recognizes that, "He has overstepped the boundary of man's finite and limited nature" (Harada 275). He went out too far and this is what he gets. In these ways he is much like Hemingway, a noble hero. His actions and the consequences of them are easily notable and should not be looked down upon. In the long run, Santiago answered his calling, fought his battles, and when he was finally defeated by his own pride, he recognized it and accepted it. This makes Santiago a noble hero.

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1899, the son of a doctor and a music teacher.

He began his writing career as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. At age eighteen, he volunteered to serve as a Red Cross ambulance driver in World War I and was sent to Italy, where he was badly injured by shrapnel. Hemingway later fictionalized his experience in Italy in what some consider his greatest novel, *A Farewell to Arms*. In 1921, Hemingway moved to Paris, where he served as a correspondent for the *Toronto Daily Star*. In Paris, he fell in with a group of American and English expatriate writers that included F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Ford Madox Ford. In the early 1920s, Hemingway began to achieve fame as a chronicler of the disaffection felt by many American youth after World War I—a generation of youth whom Stein memorably dubbed the "Lost Generation." His novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) established him as a dominant literary voice of his time. His spare, charged style of writing was revolutionary at the time and would be imitated, for better or for worse, by generations of aspiring young writers to come.

After leaving Paris, Hemingway wrote on bullfighting, published short stories and articles, covered the Spanish Civil War as a journalist, and published his best-selling novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). These pieces helped Hemingway build up the mythic breed of masculinity for which he wished to be known. His work and his life revolved around big-game hunting, fishing, boxing, and bullfighting, endeavors that he tried to master as seriously as he did writing. In the 1930s, Hemingway lived in Key West, Florida, and later in Cuba, and his years of experience fishing the Gulf Stream and the Caribbean provided an essential background for the vivid descriptions of the fisherman's craft in *The Old Man and*

the Sea. In 1936 he wrote a piece for *Esquire* about a Cuban fisherman who was dragged out to sea by a great marlin, a game fish that typically weighs hundreds of pounds. Sharks had destroyed the fisherman's catch by the time he was found half-delirious by other fish-

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ermen. This story seems an obvious seed for the tale of Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

A great fan of baseball, Hemingway liked to talk in the sport's lingo, and by 1952, he badly "needed a win." His novel *Across the River and Into the Trees*, published in 1950, was a disaster. It was his first novel in ten years, and he had claimed to friends that it was his best yet. Critics, however, disagreed and called the work the worst thing Hemingway had ever written. Many readers claimed it read like a parody of Hemingway. The control and precision of his earlier prose seemed to be lost beyond recovery.

The huge success of *The Old Man and the Sea*, published in 1952, was a much-needed vindication. The novella won the 1953 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and it very likely cinched the Nobel Prize for Hemingway in 1954, as it was cited for particular recognition by the Nobel Academy. It would be the last novel published in his lifetime.

Although the novella helped to regenerate Hemingway's wilting career, it has since been met by divided critical opinion. While some critics have praised *The Old Man and the Sea* as a new classic that takes its place among such established American works as William Faulkner's short story "The Bear" and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, others have attacked the story as "imitation Hemingway" and find fault with the author's departure from the uncompromising realism with which he made his name.

Because Hemingway was a writer who always relied heavily on autobiographical sources, some critics, not surprisingly, eventually decided that the novella served as a thinly veiled attack upon them. According to this reading, Hemingway was the old master at the end of his career being torn apart by—but ultimately triumphing over—critics on a feeding frenzy. But this reading ultimately reduces *The Old Man and the Sea* to little more than an act of literary revenge. The more compelling interpretation asserts that the novella is a parable about life itself, in particular man's struggle for triumph in a world that seems designed to destroy him.

Despite the soberly life-affirming tone of the novella, Hemingway was, at the end of his life, more and more prone to debilitating bouts of depression. He committed suicide in 1961 in Ketchum, Idaho.

The *Old Man and the Sea* is the story of an epic struggle between an old, seasoned fisherman and the

greatest catch of his life. For eighty-four days, Santiago, an aged Cuban fisherman, has set out to sea and returned empty-handed. So conspicuously unlucky is he that the parents of his young devoted apprentice and friend, Manolin, have forced the boy to leave the old man in order to fish in a more prosperous boat. Nevertheless, the boy continues to care for the old man upon his return each night. He helps the old man tote his gear to his ramshackle hut, secures food for him, and discusses the latest developments in American baseball, especially the trials of the old man's hero, Joe DiMaggio. Santiago is confident that his unproductive streak will soon come to an end, and he resolves to sail out farther than usual the following day.

On the eighty-fifth day of his unlucky streak, Santiago does as promised, sailing his skiff far beyond the island's shallow coastal waters and venturing into the Gulf Stream. He prepares his lines and drops them. At noon, a big fish, which he knows is a marlin, takes the bait that Santiago has placed one hundred fathoms deep in the waters. The old man expertly hooks the fish, but he cannot pull it in. Instead, the fish begins to pull the boat.

Unable to tie the line fast to the boat for fear the fish would snap a taut line, the old man bears the strain of the line with his shoulders, back, and hands, ready to give slack should the marlin make a run. The fish pulls the boat all through the day, through the night, through another day, and through another night. It swims steadily northwest until at last it tires and swims east with the current. The entire time, Santiago endures constant pain from the fishing line. Whenever the fish lunges, leaps, or makes a dash for freedom, the cord cuts him badly. Although wounded and weary, the old man feels a deep empathy and admiration for the marlin, his brother in suffering, strength, and resolve.

On the third day the fish tires, and Santiago, sleep-deprived, aching, and nearly delirious, manages to pull the marlin in close enough to kill

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it with a harpoon thrust. Dead beside the skiff, the marlin is the largest Santiago has ever seen. He lashes it to his boat, raises the small mast, and sets sail for home. While Santiago is excited by the price that the marlin will bring at market, he is more concerned that the people who will eat the fish are unworthy of its greatness.

As Santiago sails on with the fish, the marlin's blood leaves a trail in the water and attracts sharks. The first to attack is a great mako shark, which Santiago manages to slay with the harpoon. In the struggle, the old man loses the harpoon and lengths of valuable rope, which leaves him vulnerable to other shark attacks. The old man fights off the successive vicious predators as best he can, stabbing at them with a crude spear he makes by lashing a knife to an oar, and even clubbing them with the boat's tiller. Although he kills several sharks, more and more appear, and by the time night falls, Santiago's continued fight against the scavengers is useless. They devour the marlin's precious meat, leaving only skeleton, head, and tail. Santiago chastises himself for going "out too far," and for sacrificing his great and worthy opponent. He arrives home before daybreak, stumbles back to his shack, and sleeps very deeply.

The next morning, a crowd of amazed fishermen gathers around the skeletal carcass of the fish, which is still lashed to the boat. Knowing nothing of the old man's struggle, tourists at a nearby café observe the remains of the giant marlin and mistake it for a shark. Manolin, who has been worried sick over the old man's absence, is moved to tears when he finds Santiago safe in his bed. The boy fetches the old man some coffee and the daily papers with the baseball scores, and watches him sleep. When the old man wakes, the two agree to fish as partners once more. The old man returns to sleep and dreams his usual dream of lions at play on the beaches of Africa.

Santiago—The old man of the novella's title, Santiago is a Cuban fisherman who has had an extended run of bad luck. Despite his expertise, he has been unable to catch a fish for eighty-four days. He is humble, yet exhibits a justified pride in his abilities. His knowledge of the sea and its creatures, and of his craft, is unparalleled and helps him preserve a sense of hope regardless of circumstance. Throughout his life, Santiago has been presented with contests to test his strength and endurance. The marlin with which he

struggles for three days represents his greatest challenge. Paradoxically, although Santiago ultimately loses the fish, the marlin is also his greatest victory.

The Marlin—Santiago hooks the marlin, which we learn at the end of the novella measures eighteen feet, on the first afternoon of his fishing expedition. Because of the marlin's great size, Santiago is unable to pull the fish in, and the two become engaged in a kind of tug-of-war that often seems more like an alliance than a struggle. The fishing line serves as a symbol of the fraternal connection Santiago feels with the fish. When the captured marlin is later destroyed by sharks, Santiago feels destroyed as well. Like Santiago, the marlin is implicitly compared to Christ.

Manolin—A boy presumably in his adolescence, Manolin is Santiago's apprentice and devoted attendant. The old man first took him out on a boat when he was merely five years old. Due to Santiago's recent bad luck, Manolin's parents have forced the boy to go out on a different fishing boat. Manolin, however, still cares deeply for the old man, to whom he continues to look as a mentor. His love for Santiago is unmistakable as the two discuss baseball and as the young boy recruits help from villagers to improve the old man's impoverished conditions.

Joe DiMaggio—Although DiMaggio never appears in the novel, he plays a significant role nonetheless. Santiago worships him as a model of strength and commitment, and his thoughts turn toward DiMaggio

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whenever he needs to reassure himself of his own strength. Despite a painful bone spur that might have crippled another player, DiMaggio went on to secure a triumphant career. He was a center fielder for the New York Yankees from 1936 to 1951, and is often considered the best all-around player ever at that position.

Perico—Perico, the reader assumes, owns the bodega in Santiago's village. He never appears in the novel, but he serves an important role in the fisherman's life by providing him with newspapers that report the baseball scores. This act establishes him as a kind man who helps the aging Santiago.

Martin—Like Perico, Martin, a café owner in Santiago's village, does not appear in the story. The reader learns of him through Manolin, who often goes to Martin for Santiago's supper. As the old man says, Martin is a man of frequent kindness who deserves to be repaid.

THEMES

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Honor in Struggle, Defeat, and Death

From the very first paragraph, Santiago is characterized as someone struggling against defeat. He has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish—he will soon pass his own record of eighty-seven days. Almost as a reminder of Santiago's struggle, the sail of his skiff resembles "the flag of permanent defeat." But the old man refuses defeat at every turn: he resolves to sail out beyond the other fishermen to where the biggest fish promise to be. He lands the marlin, tying his record of eighty-seven days after a brutal three-day fight, and he continues to ward off sharks from stealing his prey, even though he knows the battle is useless.

Because Santiago is pitted against the creatures of the sea, some readers choose to view the tale as a chronicle of man's battle *against* the natural world, but the novella is, more accurately, the story of man's place *within* nature. Both Santiago and the marlin display qualities of pride, honor, and bravery, and both

are subject to the same eternal law: they must kill or be killed. As Santiago reflects when he watches the weary warbler fly toward shore, where it will inevitably meet the hawk, the world is filled with predators, and no living thing can escape the inevitable struggle that will lead to its death. Santiago lives according to his own observation: “man is not made for defeat . . . [a] man can be destroyed but not defeated.” In Hemingway’s portrait of the world, death is inevitable, but the best men (and animals) will nonetheless refuse to give in to its power. Accordingly, man and fish will struggle to the death, just as hungry sharks will lay waste to an old man’s trophy catch.

The novel suggests that it is possible to transcend this natural law. In fact, the very inevitability of destruction creates the terms that allow a worthy man or beast to transcend it. It is precisely through the effort

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to battle the inevitable that a man can prove himself. Indeed, a man can prove this determination over and over through the worthiness of the opponents he chooses to face. Santiago finds the marlin worthy of a fight, just as he once found “the great negro of Cienfuegos” worthy. His admiration for these opponents brings love and respect into an equation with death, as their destruction becomes a point of honor and bravery that confirms Santiago’s heroic qualities. One might characterize the equation as the working out of the statement “Because I love you, I have to kill you.” Alternately, one might draw a parallel to the poet John Keats and his insistence that beauty can only be comprehended in the moment before death, as beauty bows to destruction. Santiago, though destroyed at the end of the novella, is never defeated. Instead, he emerges as a hero. Santiago’s struggle does not enable him to change man’s place in the world. Rather, it enables him to meet his most dignified destiny.

Pride as the Source of Greatness and Determination

Many parallels exist between Santiago and the classic heroes of the ancient world. In addition to exhibiting terrific strength, bravery, and moral certainty, those heroes usually possess a tragic flaw—a quality that, though admirable, leads to their eventual downfall. If pride is Santiago’s fatal flaw, he is keenly aware of it. After sharks have destroyed the marlin, the old man apologizes again and again to his worthy opponent. He has ruined them both, he concedes, by sailing beyond the usual boundaries of fishermen. Indeed, his last word on the subject comes when he asks himself the reason for his undoing and decides, “Nothing . . . I went out too far.”

While it is certainly true that Santiago’s eighty-four-day run of bad luck is an affront to his pride as a masterful fisherman, and that his attempt to bear out his skills by sailing far into the gulf waters leads to disaster, Hemingway does not condemn his protagonist for being full of pride. On the contrary, Santiago stands as proof that pride motivates men to greatness. Because the old man acknowledges that he killed the mighty marlin largely out of pride, and because his capture of the marlin leads in turn to his heroic transcendence of defeat, pride becomes the source of Santiago’s greatest strength. Without a ferocious sense of pride, that battle would never have been fought, or more likely, it would have been abandoned before the end.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols • 11

Santiago’s pride also motivates his desire to transcend the destructive forces of nature. Throughout the novel, no matter how baleful his circumstances become, the old man exhibits an unflinching determination to catch the marlin and bring it to shore. When the first shark arrives, Santiago’s resolve is mentioned twice in the space of just a few paragraphs. First we are told that the old man “was full of resolution but he had little hope.” Then, sentences later, the narrator says: “He hit [the shark] without hope but with resolution.” The old man meets every challenge with the same unwavering determination:

he is willing to die in order to bring in the marlin, and he is willing to die in order to battle the feeding sharks. It is this conscious decision to act, to fight, to never give up that enables Santiago to avoid defeat. Although he returns to Havana without the trophy of his long battle, he returns with the knowledge that he has acquitted himself proudly and manfully. Hemingway seems to suggest that victory is not a prerequisite for honor. Instead, glory depends upon one having the pride to see a struggle through to its end, regardless of the outcome. Even if the old man had returned with the marlin intact, his moment of glory, like the marlin's meat, would have been short-lived. The glory and honor Santiago accrues comes not from his battle itself but from his pride and determination to fight.

MOTIFS

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Crucifixion Imagery

In order to suggest the profundity of the old man's sacrifice and the glory that derives from it, Hemingway purposefully likens Santiago to Christ, who, according to Christian theology, gave his life for the greater glory of humankind. Crucifixion imagery is the most noticeable way in which Hemingway creates the symbolic parallel between Santiago and Christ. When Santiago's palms are first cut by his fishing line, the reader cannot help but think of Christ suffering his stigmata. Later, when the sharks arrive, Hemingway portrays the old man as a crucified martyr, saying that he makes a noise similar to that of a man having nails driven through his hands. Furthermore, the image of the old man struggling up

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the hill with his mast across his shoulders recalls Christ's march toward Calvary. Even the position in which Santiago collapses on his bed—face down with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up—brings to mind the image of Christ suffering on the cross. Hemingway employs these images in the final pages of the novella in order to link Santiago to Christ, who exemplified transcendence by turning loss into gain, defeat into triumph, and even death into renewed life.

Life from Death

Death is *the* unavoidable force in the novella, the one fact that no living creature can escape. But death, Hemingway suggests, is never an end in itself: in death there is always the possibility of the most vigorous life. The reader notes that as Santiago slays the marlin, not only is the old man reinvigorated by the battle, but the fish also comes alive "with his death in him." Life, the possibility of renewal, necessarily follows on the heels of death.

Whereas the marlin's death hints at a type of physical reanimation, death leads to life in less literal ways at other points in the novella. The book's crucifixion imagery emphasizes the cyclical connection between life and death, as does Santiago's battle with the marlin. His success at bringing the marlin in earns him the awed respect of the fishermen who once mocked him, and secures him the companionship of Manolin, the apprentice who will carry on Santiago's teachings long after the old man has died.

The Lions on the Beach

Santiago dreams his pleasant dream of the lions at play on the beaches of Africa three times. The first time is the night before he departs on his three-day fishing expedition, the second occurs when he sleeps on the boat for a few hours in the middle of his struggle with the marlin, and the third takes place at the very end of the book. In fact, the sober promise of the triumph and regeneration with which the novella closes is supported by the final image of the lions. Because Santiago associates the lions with his youth, the dream suggests the circular nature of life. Additionally, because Santiago imagines the lions, fierce predators, playing, his dream suggests a harmony between the opposing forces—life and death, love and hate, destruction and regeneration—of nature.

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SYMBOLS

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Marlin

Magnificent and glorious, the marlin symbolizes the ideal opponent. In a world in which “everything kills everything else in some way,” San- tiago feels genuinely lucky to find himself matched against a creature that brings out the best in him: his strength and courage, his love and respect.