The Old Man and the Sea

Full Summary

*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 Santiago 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 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.

Story Elements

**Narrator:** The novella is narrated by an anonymous narrator.

**Point of View:** Sometimes the narrator describes the characters and events objectively, that is, as they would appear to an outside observer. However, the narrator frequently provides details about Santiago’s inner thoughts and dreams.

**Tone:** Despite the narrator’s journalistic, matter-of-fact tone, his reverence for Santiago and his struggle is apparent. The text affirms its hero to a degree unusual even for Hemingway.

**Tense:** Past

**Setting (Time):** Late 1940s

**Setting (Place)**A small fishing village near Havana, Cuba; the waters of the Gulf of Mexico

**Protagonist:** Santiago

**Major Conflict:** For three days, Santiago struggles against the greatest fish of his long career.

**Rising Action:** After eighty-four successive days without catching a fish, Santiago promises his former assistant, Manolin, that he will go “far out” into the ocean. The marlin takes the bait, but Santiago is unable to reel him in, which leads to a three-day struggle between the fisherman and the fish.

**Climax:** The marlin circles the skiff while Santiago slowly reels him in. Santiago nearly passes out from exhaustion but gathers enough strength to harpoon the marlin through the heart, causing him to lurch in an almost sexual climax of vitality before dying.

**Falling Action:** Santiago sails back to shore with the marlin tied to his boat. Sharks follow the marlin’s trail of blood and destroy it. Santiago arrives home toting only the fish’s skeletal carcass. The village fishermen respect their formerly ridiculed peer, and Manolin pledges to return to fishing with Santiago. Santiago falls into a deep sleep and dreams of lions.

**Themes:** The honor in struggle, defeat, and death; pride as the source of greatness and determination.

**Motifs:** Crucifixion imagery; life from death; the lions on the beach

**Symbols:** The marlin; the shovel-nosed sharks

**Foreshadowing:** Santiago’s insistence that he will sail out farther than ever before foreshadows his destruction; because the marlin is linked to Santiago, the marlin’s death foreshadows Santiago’s own destruction by the sharks.

Day One:

Santiago, an old fisherman, has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish. For the first forty days, a boy named Manolin had fished with him, but Manolin’s parents, who call Santiago *salao,* or “the worst form of unlucky,” forced Manolin to leave him in order to work in a more prosperous boat. The old man is wrinkled, splotched, and scarred from handling heavy fish on cords, but his eyes, which are the color of the sea, remain “cheerful and undefeated.”

Having made some money with the successful fishermen, the boy offers to return to Santiago’s skiff, reminding him of their previous eighty-seven-day run of bad luck, which culminated in their catching big fish every day for three weeks. He talks with the old man as they haul in Santiago’s fishing gear and laments that he was forced to obey his father, who lacks faith and, as a result, made him switch boats. The pair stops for a beer at a terrace café, where fishermen make fun of Santiago. The old man does not mind. Santiago and Manolin reminisce about the many years the two of them fished together, and the boy begs the old man to let him provide fresh bait fish for him. The old man accepts the gift with humility. Santiago announces his plans to go “far out” in the sea the following day.

Manolin and Santiago haul the gear to the old man’s shack, which is furnished with nothing more than the barest necessities: a bed, a table and chair, and a place to cook. On the wall are two pictures: one of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and one of the Virgin of Cobre, the patroness of Cuba. The old man has taken down the photograph of his wife, which made him feel “too lonely.” The two go through their usual dinner ritual, in which the boy asks Santiago what he is going to eat, and the old man replies, “yellow rice with fish,” and then offers some to the boy. The boy declines, and his offer to start the old man’s fire is rejected. In reality, there is no food.

Excited to read the baseball scores, Santiago pulls out a newspaper, which he says was given to him by Perico at the bodega. Manolin goes to get the bait fish and returns with some dinner as well, a gift from Martin, the café owner. The old man is moved by Martin’s thoughtfulness and promises to repay the kindness. Manolin and Santiago discuss baseball. Santiago is a huge admirer of “the great DiMaggio,” whose father was a fisherman. After discussing with Santiago the greatest ballplayers and the greatest baseball managers, the boy declares that Santiago is the greatest fisherman: “There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you.” Finally, the boy leaves, and the old man goes to sleep. He dreams his sweet, recurring dream, of lions playing on the white beaches of Africa, a scene he saw from his ship when he was a very young man.

**Analysis**

The opening pages of the book establish Santiago’s character and set the scene for the action to follow. Even though he loves Manolin and is loved dearly by the boy, the old man lives as an outsider. The greeting he receives from the fishermen, most of whom mock him for his fruitless voyages to sea, shows Santiago to be an alienated, almost ostracized figure. Such an alienated position is characteristic of Hemingway’s heroes, whose greatest achievements depend, in large part, upon their isolation. In Hemingway’s works, it is only once a man is removed from the numbing and false confines of modern society that he can confront the larger, universal truths that govern him. In *A Farewell to Arms,* for instance, only after Frederic Henry abandons his post in the army and lives in seclusion is he able to learn the dismal lesson that death renders meaningless such notions as honor, glory, and love. Yet, although Hemingway’s message in *The Old Man and the Sea* is tragic in many respects, the story of Santiago and the destruction of his greatest catch is far from dismal. Unlike Frederic, Santiago is not defeated by his enlightenment. The narrator emphasizes Santiago’s perseverance in the opening pages, mentioning that the old man’s eyes are still “cheerful and undefeated” after suffering nearly three months without a single catch. And, although Santiago’s struggle will bring about defeat—the great marlin will be devoured by sharks—Santiago will emerge as a victor. As he tells the boy, in order for this to happen, he must venture far out, farther than the other fishermen are willing to go.

In Hemingway’s narrative, Santiago is elevated above the normal stature of a protagonist, assuming near-mythical proportions. He belongs to a tradition of literary heroes whose superior qualities necessitate their distance from ordinary humans and endeavors. Because Manolin constantly expresses his devotion to, reverence for, and trust of Santiago, he establishes his mentor as a figure of significant moral and professional stature, despite the difficulties of the past eighty-four days. While other young fishermen make fun of the old man, Manolin knows Santiago’s true worth and the extent of Santiago’s knowledge. In the old man, Hemingway provides the reader with a model of good, simple living: Santiago transcends the evils of the world—hunger, poverty, the contempt of his fellow men—by enduring them.

In these first few scenes, Hemingway introduces several issues and images that will recur throughout the book. The first is the question of Santiago’s endurance. The descriptions of his crude hut, almost nonexistent eating habits, and emaciated body force the reader to question the old man’s physical capacities. How could Santiago, who subsists on occasional handouts from kind café owners or, worse, imaginary meals, wage the terrific battle with the great marlin that the novel recounts? As the book progresses, we see that the question is irrelevant. Although Santiago’s battle is played out in physical terms, the stakes are decidedly spiritual.

This section also introduces two important symbols: the lions playing on the beaches of Africa and baseball’s immortal Joe DiMaggio. Throughout his trial at sea, Santiago’s thoughts will return to DiMaggio, for to him the baseball player represents a kind of triumphant survival. After suffering a bone spur in his heel, DiMaggio returned to baseball to become, in the eyes of many, the greatest player of all time. The lions are a more enigmatic symbol. The narrator says that they are Santiago’s only remaining dream. When he sleeps, he no longer envisions storms or women or fish, but only the “young cats in the dusk,” which “he love[s] . . . as he love[s] the boy.” Because the image of the lions has stayed with Santiago since his boyhood, the lions connect the end of the old man’s life with the beginning, giving his existence a kind of circularity. Like Santiago, the lions are hunters at the core of their being. The fact that Santiago dreams of the lions at play rather than on the hunt indicates that his dream is a break—albeit a temporary one—from the vicious order of the natural world.

Day Two

The next morning, before sunrise, the old man goes to Manolin’s house to wake the boy. The two head back to Santiago’s shack, carry the old man’s gear to his boat, and drink coffee from condensed milk cans. Santiago has slept well and is confident about the day’s prospects. He and Manolin part on the beach, wishing each other good luck.

The old man rows steadily away from shore, toward the deep waters of the Gulf Stream. He hears the leaps and whirs of the flying fish, which he considers to be his friends, and thinks with sympathy of the small, frail birds that try to catch them. He loves the sea, though at times it can be cruel. He thinks of the sea as a woman whose wild behavior is beyond her control. The old man drops his baited fishing lines to various measured depths and rows expertly to keep them from drifting with the current. Above all else, he is precise.

The sun comes up. Santiago continues to move away from shore, observing his world as he drifts along. He sees flying fish pursued by dolphins; a diving, circling seabird; Sargasso weed, a type of seaweed found in the Gulf Stream; the distasteful purple Portuguese man-of-war; and the small fish that swim among the jellyfish-like creatures’ filaments. Rowing farther and farther out, Santiago follows the seabird that is hunting for fish, using it as a guide. Soon, one of the old man’s lines goes taut. He pulls up a ten-pound tuna, which, he says out loud, will make a lovely piece of bait. He wonders when he developed the habit of talking to himself but does not remember. He thinks that if the other fishermen heard him talking, they would think him crazy, although he knows he isn’t. Eventually, the old man realizes that he has sailed so far out that he can no longer see the green of the shore.

When the projecting stick that marks the top of the hundred-fathom line dips sharply, Santiago is sure that the fish tugging on the line is of a considerable size, and he prays that it will take the bait. The marlin plays with the bait for a while, and when it does finally take the bait, it starts to move with it, pulling the boat. The old man gives a mighty pull, then another, but he gains nothing. The fish drags the skiff farther into the sea. No land at all is visible to Santiago now.

All day the fish pulls the boat as the old man braces the line with his back and holds it taut in his hands, ready to give more line if necessary. The struggle goes on all night, as the fish continues to pull the boat. The glow given off by the lights of Havana gradually fades, signifying that the boat is the farthest from shore it has been so far. Over and over, the old man wishes he had the boy with him. When he sees two porpoises playing in the water, Santiago begins to pity his quarry and consider it a brother. He thinks back to the time that he caught one of a pair of marlin: the male fish let the female take the bait, then he stayed by the boat, as though in mourning. Although the memory makes him sad, Santiago’s determination is unchecked: as the marlin swims out, the old man goes “beyond all people in the world” to find him.

The sun rises and the fish has not tired, though it is now swimming in shallower waters. The old man cannot increase the tension on the line, because if it is too taut it will break and the fish will get away. Also, if the hook makes too big a cut in the fish, the fish may get away from it. Santiago hopes that the fish will jump, because its air sacs would fill and prevent the fish from going too deep into the water, which would make it easier to pull out. A yellow weed attaches to the line, helping to slow the fish. Santiago can do nothing but hold on. He pledges his love and respect to the fish, but he nevertheless promises that he will kill his opponent before the day ends.

**Analysis**

As Santiago sets out on the eighty-fifth day, the reader witnesses the qualities that earn him Manolin’s praise and dedication. The old man is an expert seaman, able to read the sea, sky, and their respective creatures like books that tell him what he needs to know. The flying fish, for instance, signal the arrival of dolphins, while, in Santiago’s experience, the magnificent tug on the line can mean only one thing: a marlin—a type of large game fish that weighs hundreds of pounds. Unlike the fishermen he passes on his way into the deep waters of the gulf, Santiago exercises an unparalleled precision when fishing. He keeps his lines perfectly straight instead of letting them drift as the other fishermen do, which means that he always knows exactly how deep they are. Santiago’s focus, his strength and resolve in the face of tremendous obstacles, as well as the sheer artistry with which he executes his tasks, mark him as a hero.

Santiago conforms to the model of the classical hero in two important respects. First, he displays a rare determination to understand the universe, as is evident when he meditates that the sea is beautiful and benevolent, but also so cruel that the birds who rely on the sea’s bounty are too delicate for it. Second, the old man possesses a tragic flaw that will lead to his downfall: pride. Santiago’s pride carries him far, not only metaphorically but literally—beyond his fellow fishermen into beautiful but, in the end, terribly cruel waters. As in classical epics, the most important struggle in Hemingway’s novella is a moral one. The fish itself is of secondary importance, for it is merely a trophy, a material prize.

Some critics have taken issue with Hemingway’s depiction of the old man because it betrays the very tenets of fiction that the author demanded (see “Hemingway’s Style”). Hemingway was, first and foremost, a proponent of realism. He wished to strip literature of its pretense and ornamentation, and he built a reputation as a journalistic writer who prized hard facts above all else. Metaphysical meditations and lofty philosophizing held little interest for Hemingway when compared to the details of daily life. As he states in *A Farewell to Arms,* “Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the number of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.” But several critics have charged Hemingway with a failure to render his old man or, for that matter, the sea realistically. Hemingway has forged particular details that simply are not true. For example, as critic Robert P. Weeks points out, the poisonous Portuguese man-of-war that follows Santiago’s boat would not appear in the waters off of Cuba for another six months. A more significant, less petty objection is the charge that Hemingway reduces Santiago to an unrealistic archetype of goodness and purity, while the surrounding world is marked by man’s romance and brotherhood with the sea and its many creatures.

Many critics believe that Hemingway was striking out into new literary territory with *The Old Man and the Sea.* America’s foremost proponent of realism seemed to be moving toward something as highly symbolic as parable. Hemingway, however, disagreed. The philosophy that governed his writing of the novella was the same one that shaped his earlier novels. In a 1958 interview with *The Paris Review,* Hemingway spoke about *The Old Man and the Sea*:

To Hemingway, Santiago and Manolin were as true to the real world as protagonists. The old man’s memory of hooking the female marlin of a male-female pair exemplifies Hemingway’s vision of a world in which women have no real place—even the picture of Santiago’s wife no longer remains on his wall. Men are the central focus of most of Hemingway’s writing and certainly of *The Old Man and the Sea.* It is no coincidence that Santiago is convinced that his greatest adversary is, as he continually notes, a male, a fact that he could not possibly ascertain before even seeing the fish.

Day Three

A small, tired warbler (a type of bird) lands on the stern of the skiff, flutters around Santiago’s head, then perches on the taut fishing line that links the old man to the big fish. The old man suspects that it is the warbler’s first trip, and that it knows nothing of the hawks that will meet the warbler as it nears land. Knowing that the warbler cannot understand him, the old man tells the bird to stay and rest up before heading toward shore. Just then the marlin surges, nearly pulling Santiago overboard, and the bird departs. Santiago notices that his hand is bleeding from where the line has cut it. Aware that he will need to keep his strength, the old man makes himself eat the tuna he caught the day before, which he had expected to use as bait. While he cuts and eats the fish with his right hand, his already cut left hand cramps and tightens into a claw under the strain of taking all the fish’s resistance. Santiago is angered and frustrated by the weakness of his own body, but the tuna, he hopes, will reinvigorate the hand. As he eats, he feels a brotherly desire to feed the marlin too.

While waiting for the cramp in his hand to ease, Santiago looks across the vast waters and thinks himself to be completely alone. A flight of ducks passes overhead, and he realizes that it is impossible for a man to be alone on the sea. The slant of the fishing line changes, indicating to the old fisherman that the fish is approaching the surface. Suddenly, the fish leaps magnificently into the air, and Santiago sees that it is bigger than any he has ever witnessed; it is two feet longer than the skiff itself. Santiago declares it “great” and promises never to let the fish learn its own strength. The line races out until the fish slows to its earlier pace. By noon, the old man’s hand is uncramped, and though he claims he is not religious, he says ten Hail Marys and ten Our Fathers and promises that, if he catches the fish, he will make a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre. In case his struggle with the marlin should continue for another night, Santiago baits another line in hopes of catching another meal.

The second day of Santiago’s struggle with the marlin wears on. The old man alternately questions and justifies seeking the death of such a noble opponent. As dusk approaches, Santiago’s thoughts turn to baseball. The great DiMaggio, thinks the old man, plays brilliantly despite the pain of a bone spur in his heel. Santiago is not actually sure what a bone spur is, but he is sure he would not be able to bear the pain of one himself. (A bone spur is an outgrowth that projects from the bone.) He wonders if DiMaggio would stay with the marlin. To boost his confidence, the old man recalls the great all-night arm-wrestling match he won as a young man. Having beaten “the great negro from Cienfuegos [a town in Cuba],” Santiago earned the title *El Campeón,* or “The Champion.”

Just before nightfall, a dolphin takes the second bait Santiago had dropped. The old man hauls it in with one hand and clubs it dead. He saves the meat for the following day. Although Santiago boasts to the marlin that he feels prepared for their impending fight, he is really numb with pain. The stars come out. Santiago considers the stars his friends, as he does the great marlin. He considers himself lucky that his lot in life does not involve hunting anything so great as the stars or the moon. Again, he feels sorry for the marlin, though he is as determined as ever to kill it. The fish will feed many people, Santiago decides, though they are not worthy of the creature’s great dignity. By starlight, still bracing and handling the line, Santiago considers rigging the oars so that the fish will have to pull harder and eventually tire itself out. He fears this strategy would ultimately result in the loss of the fish. He decides to “rest,” which really just means putting down his hands and letting the line go across his back, instead of using his own strength to resist his opponent.

After “resting” for two hours, Santiago chastises himself for not sleeping, and he fears what could happen should his mind become “unclear.” He butchers the dolphin he caught earlier and finds two flying fish in its belly. In the chilling night, he eats half of a fillet of dolphin meat and one of the flying fish. While the marlin is quiet, the old man decides to sleep. He has several dreams: a school of porpoises leaps from and returns to the ocean; he is back in his hut during a storm; and he again dreams of the lions on the beach in Africa.

**Analysis**

The narrator tells us that Santiago does not mention the hawks that await the little warbler because he thinks the bird will learn about them “soon enough.” Hemingway tempers the grimness of Santiago’s observation with Santiago’s feeling of deep connection with the warbler. He suggests that the world, though designed to bring about death, is a vast, interconnected network of life. Additionally, the warbler’s feeling of exhaustion and its ultimate fate—destruction by predators—mirror Santiago’s own eventual exhaustion and the marlin’s ravishment by sharks.

The brotherhood between Santiago and the surrounding world extends beyond the warbler. The old man feels an intimate connection to the great fish, as well as to the sea and stars. Santiago constantly pledges his love, respect, and sentiment of brotherhood to the marlin. For this reason, the fish’s death is not portrayed as senselessly tragic. Santiago, and seemingly Hemingway, feel that since death *must* come in the world, it is preferable that it come at the hands of a worthy opponent. The old man’s magnificence—the honor and humility with which he executes his task—elevates his struggle to a rarified, even transcendent level.

Skills that involved great displays of strength captured Hemingway’s imagination, and his fiction is filled with fishermen, big-game hunters, bullfighters, prizefighters, and soldiers. Hemingway’s fiction presents a world peopled almost exclusively by men—men who live most successfully in the world through displays of skill. In Hemingway’s world, mere survival is not enough. To elevate oneself above the masses, one must master the rules and rituals by which men are judged. Time and again, we see Santiago displaying the art and the rituals that make him a master of his trade. Only *his* lines do not drift carelessly in the current; only *he* braves waters so far from shore.

Rules and rituals dominate the rest of the old man’s life as well. When he is not thinking about fishing, his mind turns to religion or baseball. Because Santiago declares that he is not a religious man, his prayers to the Virgin of Cobre seem less an appeal to a supernatural divinity and more a habit that orders and provides a context for his daily experience. Similarly, Santiago’s worship of Joe DiMaggio, and his constant comparisons between the baseball great and himself, suggest his preference for worlds in which men are measured by a clear set of standards. The great DiMaggio’s reputation is secured by his superlative batting average as surely as Santiago’s will be by an eighteen-foot marlin.

Even though Santiago doesn’t consider himself a religious man, it is during his struggle with the marlin that the book becomes strongly suggestive of a Christian parable. As his struggle intensifies, Santiago begins to seem more and more Christ-like: through his pain, suffering, and eventual defeat, he will transcend his previous incarnation as a failed fisherman. Hemingway achieves this effect by relying on the potent and, to many readers, familiar symbolism identified with Jesus Christ’s life and death. The cuts on the old man’s hands from the fishing line recall the stigmata—the crucifixion wounds of Jesus. Santiago’s isolation, too, evokes that of Christ, who spent forty days alone in the wilderness. Having taken his boat out on the ocean farther than any other fisherman has ever gone, Santiago is beyond even the fringes of society.

Hemingway also unites the old man with marlin through Santiago’s frequent expressions of his feeling of kinship. He thus suggests that the fate of one is the fate of the other. Although they are opponents, Santiago and the marlin are also partners, allies, and, in a sense, doubles. Thus, the following passage, which links the marlin to Christ, implicitly links Santiago to Christ as well:

*“Christ, I did not know he was so big.”  
“I’ll kill him though,” [Santiago] said. “In all his greatness and his glory.”*

Santiago’s expletive (“Christ”) and the laudatory phrase “his greatness and his glory” link the fish’s fate to Christ’s. Because Santiago declares the marlin his “true brother,” he implies that they share a common fate. When, later in the book, sharks attack the marlin’s carcass, thereby attacking Santiago as well, the sense of alliance between the old man and the fish becomes even more explicit.

Day Four

The marlin wakes Santiago by jerking the line. The fish jumps out of the water again and again, and Santiago is thrown into the bow of the skiff, facedown in his dolphin meat. The line feeds out fast, and the old man brakes against it with his back and hands. His left hand, especially, is badly cut. Santiago wishes that the boy were with him to wet the coils of the line, which would lessen the friction.

The old man wipes the crushed dolphin meat off his face, fearing that it will make him nauseated and he will lose his strength. Looking at his damaged hand, he reflects that “pain does not matter to a man.” He eats the second flying fish in hopes of building up his strength. As the sun rises, the marlin begins to circle. For hours the old man fights the circling fish for every inch of line, slowly pulling it in. He feels faint and dizzy and sees black spots before his eyes. The fish riots against the line, battering the boat with its spear. When it passes under the boat, Santiago cannot believe its size. As the marlin continues to circle, Santiago adds enough pressure to the line to bring the fish closer and closer to the skiff. The old man thinks that the fish is killing him, and admires him for it, saying, “I do not care who kills who.” Eventually, he pulls the fish onto its side by the boat and plunges his harpoon into it. The fish lurches out of the water, brilliantly and beautifully alive as it dies. When it falls back into the water, its blood stains the waves.

The old man pulls the skiff up alongside the fish and fastens the fish to the side of the boat. He thinks about how much money he will be able to make from such a big fish, and he imagines that DiMaggio would be proud of him. Santiago’s hands are so cut up that they resemble raw meat. With the mast up and the sail drawn, man, fish, and boat head for land. In his light-headed state, the old man finds himself wondering for a moment if he is bringing the fish in or vice versa. He shakes some shrimp from a patch of gulf weed and eats them raw. He watches the marlin carefully as the ship sails on. The old man’s wounds remind him that his battle with the marlin was real and not a dream.

An hour later, a mako shark arrives, having smelled the marlin’s blood. Except for its jaws full of talonlike teeth, the shark is a beautiful fish. When the shark hits the marlin, the old man sinks his harpoon into the shark’s head. The shark lashes on the water and, eventually, sinks, taking the harpoon and the old man’s rope with it. The mako has taken nearly forty pounds of meat, so fresh blood from the marlin spills into the water, inevitably drawing more sharks to attack. Santiago realizes that his struggle with the marlin was for nothing; all will soon be lost. But, he muses, “a man can be destroyed but not defeated.”

Santiago tries to cheer himself by thinking that DiMaggio would be pleased by his performance, and he wonders again if his hands equal DiMaggio’s bone spurs as a handicap. He tries to be hopeful, thinking that it is silly, if not sinful, to stop hoping. He reminds himself that he didn’t kill the marlin simply for food, that he killed it out of pride and love. He wonders if it is a sin to kill something you love. The shark, on the other hand, he does not feel guilty about killing, because he did it in self-defense. He decides that “everything kills everything else in some way.”

Two hours later, a pair of shovel-nosed sharks arrives, and Santiago makes a noise likened to the sound a man might make as nails are driven through his hands. The sharks attack, and Santiago fights them with a knife that he had lashed to an oar as a makeshift weapon. He enjoyed killing the mako because it was a worthy opponent, a mighty and fearless predator, but he has nothing but disdain for the scavenging shovel-nosed sharks. The old man kills them both, but not before they take a good quarter of the marlin, including the best meat. Again, Santiago wishes that he hadn’t killed the marlin. He apologizes to the dead marlin for having gone out so far, saying it did neither of them any good.

Still hopeful that the whole ordeal had been a dream, Santiago cannot bear to look at the mutilated marlin. Another shovel-nosed shark arrives. The old man kills it, but he loses his knife in the process. Just before nightfall, two more sharks approach. The old man’s arsenal has been reduced to the club he uses to kill bait fish. He manages to club the sharks into retreat, but not before they repeatedly maul the marlin. Stiff, sore, and weary, he hopes he does not have to fight anymore. He even dares to imagine making it home with the half-fish that remains. Again, he apologizes to the marlin carcass and attempts to console it by reminding the fish how many sharks he has killed. He wonders how many sharks the marlin killed when it was alive, and he pledges to fight the sharks until he dies. Although he hopes to be lucky, Santiago believes that he “violated [his] luck” when he sailed too far out.

Around midnight, a pack of sharks arrives. Near-blind in the darkness, Santiago strikes out at the sounds of jaws and fins. Something snatches his club. He breaks off the boat’s tiller and makes a futile attempt to use it as a weapon. When the last shark tries to tear at the tough head of the marlin, the old man clubs the shark until the tiller splinters. He plunges the sharp edge into the shark’s flesh and the beast lets go. No meat is left on the marlin.

The old man spits blood into the water, which frightens him for a moment. He settles in to steer the boat, numb and past all feeling. He asks himself what it was that defeated him and concludes, “Nothing . . . I went out too far.” When he reaches the harbor, all lights are out and no one is near. He notices the skeleton of the fish still tied to the skiff. He takes down the mast and begins to shoulder it up the hill to his shack. It is terrifically heavy, and he is forced to sit down five times before he reaches his home. Once there, the old man sleeps.

The fantastical final stage of the old man’s fight with the fish brings two thematic issues to the forefront. The first concerns man’s place in nature, the second concerns nature itself. It is possible to interpret Santiago’s journey as a cautionary tale of sorts, a tragic lesson about what happens when man’s pride forces him beyond the boundaries of his rightful, human place in the world. This interpretation is undermined, however, by the fact that Santiago finds the place where he is most completely, honestly, and fully himself only by sailing out farther than he ever has before. Indeed, Santiago has not left his true place; he has *found* it, which suggests that man’s greatest potential can be found in his return to the natural world from which modern advancements have driven him.

At one point, Santiago embraces his unity with the marlin, thinking, “You are killing me, fish . . . But you have a right to . . . brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who.” This realization speaks to the novella’s theory of the natural world. As Santiago’s exhausting and near-endless battle with the marlin shows, his is a world in which life and death go hand in loving hand. Everything in the world must die, and according to Santiago, only a brotherhood between men—or creatures—can alleviate the grimness of that fact. The death of the marlin serves as a beautiful case in point, for as the fish dies it is not only transformed into something larger than itself, it is also charged with life: “Then the fish came alive, with his death in him.” In Hemingway’s conception of the natural world, beauty is deadly, age is strength, and death is the greatest instance of vitality.

The transformation that the fish undergoes upon its death anticipates the transformation that awaits Santiago in the novella’s final pages. The old man’s battle with the fish is marked by supreme pain and suffering, but he lives in a world in which extreme pain can be a source of triumph rather than defeat. The key to Santiago’s triumph, as the end of the novel makes clear, is an almost martyrlike endurance, a quality that the old man knows and values. Santiago repeatedly reminds himself that physical pain does not matter to a man, and he urges himself to keep his head clear and to know how to suffer like a man.

After the arrival of the mako shark, Santiago seems preoccupied with the notion of hope. Hope is shown to be a necessary component of endurance, so much so that the novella seems to suggest that endurance can be found wherever pain and hope meet. As Santiago sails on while the sharks continue to attack his catch, the narrator says that Santiago “was full of resolution but he had little hope”; later, the narrator comments, “He hit [the shark] without hope but with resolution.” But without hope Santiago has reason neither to fight the sharks nor to return home. He soon realizes that it is silly not to hope, and he even goes so far as to consider it a sin. Ultimately, he overcomes the shark attack by *bearing* it. The poet and critic Delmore Schwartz regards *The Old Man and the Sea* as a dramatic development in Hemingway’s career because Santiago’s “sober hope” strikes a sort of compromise between youthful naïveté and the jadedness of age. Before the novella, Hemingway had given the world heroes who lived either shrouded by illusions, such as Nick Adams in “Indian Camp,” or crushed by disillusionment, such as Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms.*

Day Five

Early the next morning, Manolin comes to the old man’s shack, and the sight of his friend’s ravaged hands brings him to tears. He goes to fetch coffee. Fishermen have gathered around Santiago’s boat and measured the carcass at eighteen feet. Manolin waits for the old man to wake up, keeping his coffee warm for him so it is ready right away. When the old man wakes, he and Manolin talk warmly. Santiago says that the sharks beat him, and Manolin insists that he will work with the old man again, regardless of what his parents say. He reveals that there had been a search for Santiago involving the coast guard and planes. Santiago is happy to have someone to talk to, and after he and Manolin make plans, the old man sleeps again. Manolin leaves to find food and the newspapers for the old man, and to tell Pedrico that the marlin’s head is his. That afternoon two tourists at the terrace café mistake the great skeleton for that of a shark. Manolin continues to watch over the old man as he sleeps and dreams of the lions.

**Analysis**

Given the depth of Santiago’s tragedy—most likely Santiago will never have the opportunity to catch another such fish in his lifetime—*The Old Man and the Sea* ends on a rather optimistic note. Santiago is reunited with Manolin, who desperately wants to complete his training. All of the old man’s noble qualities and, more important, the lessons he draws from his experience, will be passed on to the boy, which means that the fisherman’s life will continue on, in some form, even after his death. The promise of triumph and regeneration is supported by the closing image of the book. For the third time, Santiago returns to his dream of the lions at play on the African beaches. As an image that recalls the old man’s youth, the lions suggest the circularity of life. They also suggest the harmony—the lions are, after all, playing—that exists between the opposing forces of nature.

The hope that Santiago clings to at the novella’s close is not the hope that comes from naïveté. It is, rather, a hope that comes from experience, of something new emerging from something old, as a phoenix rises out of the ashes. The novella states as much when Santiago reflects that “a man can be destroyed but not defeated.” The destruction of the marlin is not a defeat for Santiago; rather, it leads to his redemption. Indeed, the fishermen who once mocked him now stand in awe of him. The decimation of the marlin, of course, is a significant loss. The sharks strip Santiago of his greater glory as surely as they strip the great fish of its flesh. But to view the shark attack as precipitating only loss is to see but half the picture. When Santiago says, “Fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive,” he is pointing, once again, to the vast, necessary, and ever-shifting tension that exists between loss and gain, triumph and defeat, life and death.

In the final pages of the novella, Hemingway employs a number of images that link Santiago to Christ, the model of transcendence, who turned loss into gain, defeat into triumph, and even death into new life. Hemingway unabashedly paints the old man as a crucified martyr: as soon as the sharks arrive, the narrator comments that the noise Santiago made resembled the noise one would make “feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood.” The narrator’s description of Santiago’s return to town also recalls the crucifixion. As the old man struggles up the hill with his mast across his shoulders, the reader cannot help but recall Christ’s march toward Calvary. Even the position in which he collapses on his bed—he sleeps facedown on the newspapers with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up—brings to mind the image of Christ suffering on the cross.

 Character List

### 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.

Santiago suffers terribly throughout *The Old Man and the Sea.* In the opening pages of the book, he has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish and has become the laughingstock of his small village. He then endures a long and grueling struggle with the marlin only to see his trophy catch destroyed by sharks. Yet, the destruction enables the old man to undergo a remarkable transformation, and he wrests triumph and renewed life from his seeming defeat. After all, Santiago is an old man whose physical existence is almost over, but the reader is assured that Santiago will persist through Manolin, who, like a disciple, awaits the old man’s teachings and will make use of those lessons long after his teacher has died. Thus, Santiago manages, perhaps, the most miraculous feat of all: he finds a way to prolong his life after death.

Santiago’s commitment to sailing out farther than any fisherman has before, to where the big fish promise to be, testifies to the depth of his pride. Yet, it also shows his determination to change his luck. Later, after the sharks have destroyed his prize marlin, Santiago chastises himself for his hubris (exaggerated pride), claiming that it has ruined both the marlin and himself. True as this might be, it is only half the picture, for Santiago’s pride also enables him to achieve his most truet and complete self. Furthermore, it helps him earn the deeper respect of the village fishermen and secures him the prized companionship of the boy—he knows that he will never have to endure such an epic struggle again.

Santiago’s pride is what enables him to endure, and it is perhaps endurance that matters most in Hemingway’s conception of the world—a world in which death and destruction, as part of the natural order of things, are unavoidable. Hemingway seems to believe that there are only two options: defeat or endurance until destruction; Santiago clearly chooses the latter. His stoic determination is mythic, nearly Christ-like in proportion. For three days, he holds fast to the line that links him to the fish, even though it cuts deeply into his palms, causes a crippling cramp in his left hand, and ruins his back. This physical pain allows Santiago to forge a connection with the marlin that goes beyond the literal link of the line: his bodily aches attest to the fact that he is well matched, that the fish is a worthy opponent, and that he himself, because he is able to fight so hard, is a worthy fisherman. This connectedness to the world around him eventually elevates Santiago beyond what would otherwise be his defeat. Like Christ, to whom Santiago is unashamedly compared at the end of the novella, the old man’s physical suffering leads to a more significant spiritual triumph.

**Manolin**

Manolin is present only in the beginning and at the end of *The Old Man and the Sea,* but his presence is important because Manolin’s devotion to Santiago highlights Santiago’s value as a person and as a fisherman. Manolin demonstrates his love for Santiago openly. He makes sure that the old man has food, blankets, and can rest without being bothered. Despite Hemingway’s insistence that his characters were a real old man and a real boy, Manolin’s purity and singleness of purpose elevate him to the level of a symbolic character. Manolin’s actions are not tainted by the confusion, ambivalence, or willfulness that typify adolescence. Instead, he is a companion who feels nothing but love and devotion.

Hemingway does hint at the boy’s resentment for his father, whose wishes Manolin obeys by abandoning the old man after forty days without catching a fish. This fact helps to establish the boy as a real human being—a person with conflicted loyalties who faces difficult decisions. By the end of the book, however, the boy abandons his duty to his father, swearing that he will sail with the old man regardless of the consequences. He stands, in the novella’s final pages, as a symbol of uncompromised love and fidelity. As the old man’s apprentice, he also represents the life that will follow from death. His dedication to learning from the old man ensures that Santiago will live on.

Themes

### The Honor in Struggle, Defeat & 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 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 & 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.

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 unflagging 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, and 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 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.

Symbols

Symbols

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and 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,” Santiago feels genuinely lucky to find himself matched against a creature that brings out the best in him: his strength, courage, love, and respect.

**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.

### The Shovel-Nosed Sharks

The shovel-nosed sharks are little more than moving appetites that thoughtlessly and gracelessly attack the marlin. As opponents of the old man, they stand in bold contrast to the marlin, which is worthy of Santiago’s effort and strength. They symbolize and embody the destructive laws of the universe and attest to the fact that those laws can be transcended only when equals fight to the death. Because they are base predators, Santiago wins no glory from battling them.

Some Questions

1. **What is the role of the sea in *The Old Man and the Sea*?**

The rich waters of the Gulf Stream provide a revolving cast of bit players—birds and beasts—that the old man observes and greets. Through Santiago’s interactions with these figures, his character emerges. In fact, Santiago is so connected to these waters, which he thinks of good-humoredly as a sometimes fickle lover, that the sea acts almost like a lens through which the reader views his character. Santiago’s interaction with the weary warbler, for instance, shows not only his kindness but also, as he thinks about the hawks that will inevitably hunt the tiny bird, a philosophy that dominates and structures his life. His strength, resolve, and pride are measured in terms of how far out into the gulf he sails. The sea also provides glimpses of the depth of Santiago’s knowledge: in his comments about the wind, the current, and the friction of the water reside an entire lifetime of experience, skill, and dedication. When, at the end of the novella, Manolin states that he still has much to learn from the old man.

1. Santiago is considered by many readers to be a tragic hero, in that his greatest strength—his pride—leads to his eventual downfall. Discuss the role of pride in Santiago’s plight.

At first, Santiago’s plight seems rather hopeless. He has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish, and he is the laughingstock of his small village. Regardless of his past, the old man determines to change his luck and sail out farther than he or the other fishermen ever have before. His commitment to sailing out to where the big fish testifies to the depth of his pride. Later, after the sharks have destroyed his prize marlin, Santiago chastises himself for his hubris, claiming that it has ruined both the marlin and himself. Yet, Santiago’s pride also enables him to achieve what he otherwise would not. Not until he meets and battles the marlin are his skills as a fisherman truly put to the test. In other words, the pride that leads to the destruction of his quarry also helps him earn the deeper respect of the village fishermen and secures him the prized.

1. Discuss religious symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea*. To what effect does Hemingway employ such images?

Christian symbolism, especially images that refer to the crucifixion of Christ, is present throughout *The Old Man and the Sea.* During the old man’s battle with the marlin, his palms are cut by his fishing cable. Given Santiago’s suffering and willingness to sacrifice his life, the wounds are suggestive of Christ’s stigmata, and Hemingway goes on to portray the old man as a Christ-like martyr. As soon as the sharks arrive, Santiago makes a noise one would make “feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood.” And the old man’s struggle up the hill to his village with his mast across his shoulders is evocative of Christ’s march toward Calvary. Even the position in which Santiago collapses on his bed—he lies face down with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up—brings to mind the image of Christ on the cross. Hemingway employs these images in order to link Santiago to Christ, who exemplified transcendence by turning loss into gain, defeat into triumph, and even death into life.

1. *Ernest Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea contains Christian themes and imagery. Should it be considered a Christian novel?*

*The Old Man and the Sea*resembles a Christian parable in many ways. Its protagonist, the fisherman Santiago, seems to exemplify Christian virtues, and the narrative clearly and repeatedly connects his trials at sea to Christ’s suffering on the cross. However, a careful examination of Santiago’s character and actions shows that he is not a Christian character and that, in reality, he embodies a warrior ethic that is incompatible with Christian ideals. The parallels between *The Old Man and the Sea*and the familiar Biblical story of the crucifixion add narrative and emotional power to the novel, but Hemingway does not use them to advance a religious moral or lesson. Instead, they serve to advance Santiago’s warrior philosophy. Though *The Old Man and the Sea*has superficial Christian elements, at its core it cannot be considered a Christian novel.

Initially, Santiago seems to be an ideal Christian. He keeps Christian icons in his house, he refers to God and Christ repeatedly, and Hemingway calls attention to his “faith,” “hope,” and “love”—the three principal Christian virtues. However, these appearances are superficial. For example, though Santiago says he has “faith,” he doesn’t use the word in a religious sense; rather, he uses it in connection with a superstitious idea of luck and to describe his feelings about baseball. When he prays during his battle with the fish, he prefaces his prayers by saying he is not religious and then proceeds to recite them mechanically, forgetting the words. Santiago’s careful and disciplined approach to everything in life is emphasized throughout the novel, so his sloppiness here only draws attention to his lack of commitment to his prayers. Even more important, Santiago never thinks of God. Instead, he finds comfort, strength, and meaning by thinking of secular things: the human world, baseball, and the creatures of the sea—not religion.

Santiago is not religious, but he does live by a moral code and has a philosophy of life. He is a master of his craft, much more attentive to its fine details than the other fisherman in his village are. He exemplifies the manly virtues of courage and determination. In addition, he has a strong sense of right and wrong when it comes to killing. He loves and respects the fish he pursues, considering them his “brothers,” and he abhors killing a creature for no good purpose. More than anything else, Santiago has an enduring pride, which he expresses most clearly in the moments he realizes that more sharks are coming to eat the great marlin he has caught. He says, “A man can be destroyed but not defeated”—that is, a true man will fight to the bitter end, to death if needed, but he will never give up. Together, these principles form a fiercely independent warrior’s philosophy of life, where living well is about meeting adversaries in honorable battle. This is not a Christian outlook on life, which would advocate a patient forbearance and a meek tolerance of hardship.

Ironically, Hemingway uses Christian symbolism to advance this alternate worldview. After Santiago has hooked the great marlin, he passes the fishing line across his back and holds it in both hands, cutting his palms repeatedly. This posture resembles that of Christ on the cross, and Santiago’s wounds evoke the stigmata, the puncture wounds Christ bore from the crucifixion. But at the end of his suffering, Santiago is not redeemed or reborn like Christ. Rather, his fish is stolen from him by sharks, and he returns to land close to death. His suffering can only be considered redemptive because, in Santiago’s view, struggle and forbearance are ends in themselves. In the novel’s philosophy, we are our best and truest selves only in a death struggle. This message is best illustrated in Hemingway’s description of the very moment of the fish’s death: “Then the fish came alive, with his death in him, and rose high out of the water showing all his great length and width and all his power and his beauty.” Only in death does the fish come completely alive, or is its greatness entirely visible.

In a Christian parable, a deep religious message might be communicated through the actions of an ordinary man. In *The Old Man and the Sea,*Hemingway turns this literary convention on end. Instead, he appropriates the powerful, resonant story of Christ’s crucifixion in order to convey and glorify the life philosophy of an ordinary man.

1. Discuss Hemingway’s “iceberg” principle of writing in relation to *The Old Man and the Sea.*

2. What significance do the lions on the beach have for the old man?

3. “A man can be destroyed but not defeated,” says the old man after the first shark attack. At the end of the story, is the old man defeated? Why or why not?

4.*The Old Man and the Sea* is, essentially, the story of a single character.

5. Indeed, other than the old man, only one human being receives any kind of prolonged attention. Discuss the role of Manolin in the novella. Is he necessary to the book?

Quotes on Characters

Santiago

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert.

There was no cast net and the boy remembered when they had sold it. But they went through this fiction every day. There was no pot of yellow rice and fish and the boy knew this too.

He was asleep in a short time and he dreamed of Africa when he was a boy and the long golden beaches and the white beaches, so white they hurt your eyes, and the high capes and the great brown mountains. He lived along that coast now every night and in his dreams he heard the surf roar and saw the native boats come riding through it.

The old man knew he was going far out and he left the smell of the land behind and rowed out into the clean early morning smell of the ocean.

This time it was a tentative pull, not solid nor heavy, and he knew exactly what it was. One hundred fathoms down a marlin was eating the sardines that covered the point and the shank of the hook where the hand-forged hook projected from the head of the small tuna.

Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked. He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is, he thought. Never have I had such a strong fish nor one who acted so strangely.

I wish I could feed the fish, he thought. He is my brother. But I must kill him and keep strong to do it.

I wonder why he jumped, the old man thought. He jumped almost as though to show me how big he was. I know now, anyway, he thought. I wish I could show him what sort of man I am. But then he would see the cramped hand. Let him think I am more man than I am and I will be so. I wish I was the fish, he thought, with everything he has against only my will and my intelligence.

“The fish is my friend too,” he said aloud. “I have never seen or heard of such a fish. But I must kill him. I am glad we do not have to try to kill the stars.”

He’s headed almost east, he thought. That means he is tired and going with the current. Soon he will have to circle. Then our true work begins.

He saw him first as a dark shadow that took so long to pass under the boat that he could not believe its length. “No,” he said. “He can’t be that big.”

The old man dropped the line and put his foot on it and lifted the harpoon as high as he could and drove it down with all his strength, and more strength he had just summoned, into the fish’s side just behind the great chest fin that rose high in the air to the altitude of the man’s chest.

Many fishermen were around the skiff looking at what was lashed beside it and one was in the water, his trousers rolled up, measuring the skeleton with a length of line.

“The ocean is very big and a skiff is small and hard to see,” the old man said. He noticed how pleasant it was to have someone to talk to instead of speaking only to himself and to the sea.

“You must get well fast for there is much that I can learn and you can teach me everything. How much did you suffer?” “Plenty,” the old man said.

Quotes about Santiago

Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated.

Here, the narrator describes what Santiago looks like. Santiago’s wrinkled skin riddled with scars and blotches shows the effects from his many years in the sun, but his eyes reveal he’s young at heart. Despite his recent streak of bad luck, Santiago retains confidence and optimism that his skills remain strong.

But, he thought, I keep them with precision. Only I have no luck anymore. But who knows? Maybe today. Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready.

When Santiago first goes out to sea, he puts his lines in the water and thinks about how other fishermen fail to be as precise with their lines. He acknowledges the benefit of luck but asserts the superiority of skill and accuracy to being lucky. His pride in his craft and reliance on his own skill and knowledge of fishing keep him hopeful.

Imagine if each day a man must try to kill the moon, he thought. The moon runs away. But imagine if a man each day should have to try to kill the sun? We were born lucky, he thought.

Santiago contemplates the fact that he plans to kill the fish despite his feelings of respect. He looks up at the sky and considers the situation from a heavenly perspective, comparing his quarry to elements beyond his control such as the sun or the moon. He realizes he operates in exactly the sphere in which he belongs and feels gratitude that he only needs to contend with fish and not greater matters. As a skilled fisherman, Santiago knows what he must do to defeat the marlin. He also understands that other forces of nature are beyond him.

After he judged that his right hand had been in the water long enough he took it out and looked at it. “It is not bad,” he said. “And pain does not matter to a man.”

When the fish begins to jump, Santiago struggles to hold the line and cuts his hand. Here, he dulls the pain and cleanses the cuts by submerging his dominant hand in the cold ocean water, and then he assesses the injuries. He chooses to ignore the pain by reminding himself that suffering doesn’t faze strong men. Santiago’s hands undergo much hurt throughout the story, but he doesn’t let the pain stop him from holding the line and persisting in his goal of catching the fish. He takes for granted that accomplishing goals entails suffering, and that every fisherman deals with pain.

He did not like to look at the fish anymore since he had been mutilated. When the fish had been hit it was as though he himself were hit.

After Santiago kills the fish and heads back to land, a shark smells the fish’s blood and takes a large bite out of it. Santiago then tries to avoid looking at the fish. Even though Santiago killed the fish, he considers it to be a part of himself. The fish, like him, was strong and determined but then falls victim while it cannot defend itself. Santiago, described as old and decrepit, does not want to acknowledge the vulnerability in both the fish and himself.

**The Marlin Quotes**

But what a fish to pull like that. He must have his mouth shut tight on the wire. I wish I could see him. I wish I could see him only once to know what I have against me.

On the day Santiago hooks the marlin, he assumes the marlin will tire out eventually, but instead the fish ends up pulling the boat for over four hours. Here, Santiago’s thoughts reveal his patience and amazement at the marlin’s strength. Santiago wishes to meet the fish whose incredible strength and determination to stay alive equal his own.

He came out unendingly and water poured from his sides. He was bright in the sun and his head and back were dark purple and in the sun the stripes on his sides showed wide and a light lavender. His sword was as long as a baseball bat and tapered like a rapier and he rose his full length from the water and then re-entered it, smoothly, like a diver and the old man saw the great scythe-blade of his tail go under and the line commenced to race out.

The narrator describes what Santiago sees after the marlin jumps out of the water for the first time. From this description, readers infer that Santiago greatly admires the majestic-looking marlin. In addition, the comparison of the marlin’s sword to a baseball bat reveals a connection between the marlin and Santiago’s hero, the baseball player Joe DiMaggio. Santiago also views the marlin’s sword as a rapier, indicating that he views the marlin as a soldier ready for battle.

I wonder what started him so suddenly? Could it have been hunger that made him desperate, or was he frightened by something in the night? Maybe he suddenly felt fear. But he was such a calm, strong fish and he seemed so fearless and so confident. It is strange.

When Santiago wakes up in the night to the pull of the line from the marlin jumping, he wonders why the marlin jumped so suddenly. Santiago dismisses the idea that the fish jumped due to hunger or fear because in his eyes, the fish seems unflappable. Since catching the fish, Santiago has also not eaten nor experienced fear, so he assumes that since he and the marlin share these experiences, their reactions to the situation match as well.

You are killing me, fish, the old man thought. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who.

As the marlin begins to circle the boat, Santiago struggles to hold the line and ruminates on his fate. Even though the marlin makes him suffer, Santiago considers him a worthy adversary and, in a way, feels honor to be possibly taken down by such an opponent. The fact that Santiago does not care which one of them dies reveals the deep respect he feels for the marlin.

Then the fish came alive, with his death in him, and rose high out of the water showing all his great length and width and all his power and his beauty.

Here, the narrator describes the marlin’s final moments. After Santiago stabs the marlin with the harpoon, the marlin rises out of the water and then falls back in. Even as the marlin dies, Santiago views him as a majestic being worthy of admiration.

**Manolin Quotes**

Where did you wash? the boy thought. The village water supply was two streets down the road. I must have water here for him, the boy thought, and soap and a good towel. Why am I so thoughtless? I must get him another shirt and a jacket for the winter and some sort of shoes and another blanket.

When Manolin brings food to Santiago, Santiago says he needed time to wash up before eating. Here, Manolin wonders where Santiago found water and chastises himself for not proactively anticipating all of Santiago’s needs. Even though Santiago seems self-sufficient, Manolin worries for him and feels the need to take care of him since Santiago has taught him so much.

If the boy were here he could rub it for me and loosen it down from the forearm, he thought.

When Santiago gets a cramp in his hand while out at sea, he thinks of how Manolin would be able to help him if he were there. Santiago thinks of Manolin often while at sea, showing how much he relies on the boy to do things that he cannot. Although Santiago exhibits great pride, he knows his own weaknesses and values his friendship with Manolin enough to let him help.

Fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive. The boy keeps me alive, he thought. I must not deceive myself too much.

After Santiago kills the marlin, he considers the fact that “everything kills everything else in some way.” At first, he thinks that fishing keeps him alive, but corrects himself and states that Manolin, in fact, keeps him alive. Manolin keeps Santiago alive not only by taking care of him, but also by learning from Santiago. As the old Santiago approaches death, the skills he passes along will live on in Manolin.

I hope no one has been too worried. There is only the boy to worry, of course. But I am sure he would have confidence.

As Santiago heads back to land, he thinks about people who may be worried about him because he has been gone for several days. As he has no family of his own, he thinks of only Manolin. Yet he trusts that, despite his worry, Manolin will have faith in him. He knows that Manolin respects his skills as a fisherman and would not wonder if Santiago had gotten lost.

The boy saw that the old man was breathing and then he saw the old man’s hands and he started to cry. He went out very quietly to go to bring some coffee and all the way down the road he was crying.

The narrator describes the scene when Manolin finds Santiago alive and asleep in his shack. Overcome with relief that Santiago is home and pain upon seeing the state of Santiago’s hands, Manolin begins to cry. Manolin’s reaction reveals his deep love and respect for Santiago. Even though Santiago felt sure Manolin wasn’t worried about him, Manolin felt extreme worry during Santiago’s absence.

## **Joe DiMaggio Quotes**

“I would like to take the great DiMaggio fishing,” the old man said. “They say his father was a fisherman. Maybe he was as poor as we are and would understand.”

Santiago and Manolin discuss professional baseball after they eat dinner on the first day, and Santiago expresses his admiration for Joe DiMaggio. DiMaggio represents skill and similar family background in that his father was a fisherman and he probably grew up poor. In Santiago’s mind, these factors contribute to strength of character as well.

But I must have confidence and I must be worthy of the great DiMaggio who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel.

On Santiago’s second day at sea, he thinks about how he doesn’t know the result of the baseball games occurring while he fishes but feels confident that DiMaggio played well. Several times throughout his time at sea, Santiago looks to DiMaggio to motivate himself. DiMaggio plays professional baseball well despite a painful condition of bone spurs, which Santiago admires. Even though Santiago experiences pain and suffering, he reminds himself that DiMaggio, his hero, does as well but persists through his pain.

Do you believe the great DiMaggio would stay with a fish as long as I will stay with this one? he thought. I am sure he would and more since he is young and strong.

Santiago compares himself to his role model as he wonders how long he can hold the line. Even though Santiago feels proud of and confident in his abilities as a fisherman, his respect for DiMaggio runs so deep that he believes DiMaggio, although not a fisherman, possesses more skill than he. DiMaggio represents the ultimate hero—young, skilled, strong, and resilient.

## **Perico Quotes**

“Perico gave it to me at the bodega,” he explained.

On the first day, Santiago says he will read about baseball in the newspaper while he waits for Manolin to return. Manolin wonders how Santiago got the newspaper, and Santiago explains that Perico, the owner of the bodega, gave the paper to him. Santiago likely does not have money to buy a newspaper, but Perico shows his kindness and respect for the old man by giving the paper to him free of charge.

“Perico is looking after the skiff and the gear. What do you want done with the head?” “Let Perico chop it up to use in fish traps.”

After Santiago returns home exhausted and injured, Manolin takes care of him. Manolin controls his grief that Santiago went through the ordeal alone by attending to the business details of the catch. A fellow fisherman, Perico rallies to help Santiago, too. Santiago shows his appreciation by giving Perico the marlin’s head. His words relegating the marlin to fish bait bring closure to his epic battle with the creature that he once envisioned as too noble to be eaten by anyone.

“Rest well, old man. I will bring stuff from the drugstore for your hands.” “Don’t forget to tell Perico the head is his.”

Manolin tenderly cares for his mentor Santiago after the ordeal of landing the marlin. They trade news of the search for Santiago and details of their fishing trips, and they make plans for their next fishing trip together. As Manolin goes out to get medicine for Santiago’s injured hands, Santiago reminds him to let Perico know he can keep the head of the marlin—all that remains of his remarkable achievement. His comment shows his readiness for the next adventure.