

*WELCOME*

**ERNEST HEMINGWAY**

**THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA**

*A THEMATIC APPROACH*

BY: A.L. RAAD SABIR RAUF

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. ABSTRACT

II. INTRODUCTION

III. THE ANECDOTE

IV. THEMES AND SYMBOLS

1. THE EPIC OF STRUGGLE AGAINST DEFEAT

2. MAN AND NATURE

3. YOUTH AND AGE

4. FRIENDSHIP

5. CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY

III. OTHER THEMES SOUGHT BY STUDENTS

IV. OTHER SYMBOLS STUDENTS MAY FIND

# ABSTRACT

Being among the best American fictional masterpieces, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is very rich in both technical and thematic subjects. Using a simple suggestive language, Hemingway raises many universal themes that touch at the core of human entity. This presentation is a simple attempt to tackle a few among many of these themes.

# KEY WORDS

Santiago,  
the old man,  
struggle,  
Hemingway

# INTRODUCTION

This is a rapid review of some of the major themes that critics and common readers may pay attention while reading this simple novella.

Hemingway uses a multifunctional but simple language in his narration. The technique he uses has direct and indirect interior monologues within a sort of bedtime-story language so as any reader can reach it with no pompous words or sophisticated expressions.

*The Old Man and the Sea* has more than twenty themes to be traced and studied carefully.

## INTRODUCTION

Yet, the simple language used covers not only deep meanings; rather it has a very novel structure of narrative technique. It also raises many questions as the one whether *The Old Man and the Sea* is an epic or not, does it have anything related reference to Hemingway's Code Hero or not?

## I. THE ANECDOTE

This is a story of a simple, old fisherman who lives in one of Havana's coastal villages. By the opening paragraph of the novella, Santiago, our old man, has not caught a single fish for eighty-four days by then. This thing made the villagers consider him *salao* or *totally* unlucky.



On day eighty-five, full of determination and hope, he sets out to catch a huge marlin which draws his skiff into the deep water of the Caribbean Sea. For three days, the old man struggles with the giant fish to beat it. Finally he could manage to kill the marlin, but as the fish is bigger than his skiff, he ties it to the side of the skiff.

On the way back, the old man faces another challenge with the sharks that keep assaulting his prey and the old man persists to defend his property and maintain his exhausting effort to hunt the fish, till he gets weaponless and helpless.

Only then he gives up his battle of defense. Eventually, when he reaches his village shore, nothing remains of the fish except its skeleton.

## II. THEMES AND SYMBOLS



## 1. THE EPIC OF STRUGGLE AGAINST DEFEAT

From the 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-five days. Almost as a reminder of Santiago's struggle, the sail of his skiff resembles “the flag of permanent defeat.” p.1

Yet, Santiago is a is not likely to accept the defeat, “Everything in him was old except his eyes. They were the same color as the sea, and they were cheerful and undefeated.” p. 2

Using the blue color as reference to the sea, Hemingway links between the old man's youth and vigor compared to those of the sea. This symbolic correlation between the his eyes and the sea is meant to be a picturesque of the old man's resolution.

Therefore, 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.

Universally, Santiago represents every man's struggle to survive. And just as Santiago's effort to bring the marlin back to land intact is doomed, no man can ever escape death. Yet through Santiago's struggle, Hemingway makes the case that escape from death is not the issue. As Santiago observes near the end of his struggle with the marlin, "a man can be destroyed but not defeated."

In other words, victory over the inevitable defeat is not what defines a man. Rather, it is a man's struggle against the defeat, even when he knows it is inevitable; that defines him. And the more difficult the struggle, the more worthy the opponent, the more powerfully a man can prove himself.

so, if that is true about normal people, how about a handicapped, bench-backed, old man with simple tools and fishing gadgets? Here lies Hemingway's code hero.

## 2. MAN AND NATURE

Since *The Old Man and the Sea* is the story of a man's struggle against a marlin, it is tempting to see the novella as depicting man's struggle against nature. In fact, through Santiago, the novella explores man's relationship *with* nature.



Santiago has no social life or communication with his fellow villagers; his sole contact with them is through Manolin. On the other hand, he does speak with the warbler, the flying fish, the songbirds, the dolphins, the Portuguese Man- of- War and many other sea creatures to pass time; and he speaks with the marlin itself in terms of challenge and brotherhood.

He thinks of the flying fish and the dolphins as his friends. Moreover he calls the Portuguese Man-of-War with vulgar words. So for him, the sea (mother nature) is his genuine community where **he** actually belongs.

The sea is dangerous, with its sharks and potentially treacherous weather, but it also sustains him by providing food in the form of dolphins and shrimp. Unlike the fishermen who consider the sea masculine “*el mar*”, the old man sees the sea as feminine “*la mar*” and considers it as the mother nature that bids and denies blesses.

Finally, Santiago does not just see the marlin as an adversary, he loves it as a brother. In the middle of their struggle, Santiago says to the marlin, "Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who." Santiago's statement shows the depth of his admiration for the marlin and hints at the fundamental law of nature that unites man and animal: all beings must die, must kill or be killed.

In this way, man and nature are joined in a circular system, in which death is necessary and fosters new life.

### 3. YOUTH AND AGE

The title of the novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*, suggests the critical thematic role that age plays in the story. The sea in itself stands for youth and vigor, but though Santiago's physical appearance exposes him as an old man, still he is as young inside as the sea, "everything in him was old except his eyes, they were the same color as the sea, and they were cheerful and undefeated."

### **3. YOUTH AND AGE**

The symbol of the blue color suggests the latent youth, vigor and determination of the old man. Another point in this regard is the book's two principal characters, Santiago and Manolin. They represent the old and the young, and a beautiful harmony develops between them. What one lacks, the other provides. Manolin, for example, has energy and enthusiasm. He finds food and clothing for Santiago, and encourages him despite his bad luck. Santiago, in turn, has wisdom and experience. He tells Manolin stories about baseball and teaches him to fish.

Santiago's age is also important to the novella because it has made him physically weak. Without this weakness, his triumph would not be so meaningful to him. As Santiago says, he "had seen many [fish] that weighed more than a thousand pounds and had caught two of that size in his life, but never alone" and never as an old man.



## **4. FRIENDSHIP**

The friendship between Santiago and Manolin plays a critical part in Santiago's victory over the marlin. In return for Santiago's mentorship and company, Manolin provides physical support to Santiago in the village, bringing him food and clothing and helping him load his skiff. He also provides emotional support, as aforesaid.

Another kind of friendship is manifested in the novella. Santiago finds friends in other creatures. The flying fish are "his principal friends on the ocean," and the marlin, through their shared struggle, becomes his "brother." He calls the stars his "distant friends," and thinks of the ocean as a woman he loves. Santiago talks to himself, talks to his weakened left hand, and imagines Manolin sitting next to him. In the end, these friendships—both real and imagined—prevent Santiago from pitying himself. Moreover, they give him his desired place in mother nature.

## 5. CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY

The *Old Man and the Sea* is full of Christian imagery. Over the course of his struggles at sea, Santiago emerges as a Christ-like figure. For instance: Santiago's injured hands recall Christ's stigmata (the wounds and scars in his palms); when the sharks attack, Santiago makes a sound like a man being crucified; when Santiago returns to shore, he carries his mast up to his shack on his shoulder, just as Christ was forced to bear his own crucifix; and Santiago's final position, resting on his bed, resembles Christ's position on the cross.

More importantly, Santiago resembles Christ in that he transforms loss into triumph, faces the inevitability of death without complaint and, in doing so, he transcends it.

## OTHER THEMES SOUGHT BY STUDENTS

- ◉ Pride and dignity
- ◉ Man is the master of all creatures
- ◉ Alienation and Salvation
- ◉ The harmony aspects in the novella
- ◉ Hunter and hunted
- ◉ Nostalgia
- ◉ Absurdity of life and futility of effort
- ◉ Luck, experience and determination
- ◉ “I am happy because I don’t have to fight the stars,” the philosophy of a simple man
- ◉ Contact between the fisherman and the fish

# OTHER SYMBOLS STUDENTS MAY FIND

- The lions
- The numbers: three, forty and forty-four
- Sharks and Portuguese Man-of War

# QUESTIONS STUDENTS MAY ASK

1. What is the major theme of the novella?
2. Why did Hemingway get the Nobel Prize for this work?
3. Are there any primitive rituals in the novella?
4. Can you find any of Hemingway's heroic code elements in this novella?
5. Can you speak about the style and figurative language used in this novella?
6. What kind of character does Santiago have?
7. What is the old man's concept of luck?
8. "Survival for the fittest," discuss in the light of the fight between the old man and the marlin!!
9. Why did all of the movies depicting *The Old Man and the Sea* fail in the cinema?
10. Can you find a better title for the novella?

*THANK YOU*