

# ***THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA***

***By Ernest Hemingway***

## **SETTING**

The narrative takes place in the 1940s. Although the opening and closing scenes take place on land in a small Cuban fishing village, the dominant setting is the Gulf Stream off the coast of Cuba. Hemingway believes the sea to be the last great unexplored area on earth, and this work travels deeply into the nature of this mysterious setting.

## **Plot summary**

*The Old Man and the Sea* is the story of a battle between an old fisherman and a large marlin. The novel opens with the fisherman, who is named Santiago who spent 84 days in the sea without catching a fish. In fact, he is so unlucky that his young learner, Manolin, was forbidden by his parents to sail with the old man and was ordered to fish with more successful and lucky fishermen. However, the boy visits Santiago's shack each night, carrying his fishing gear, getting him food and discussing American baseball and his favorite player Joe DiMaggio. Santiago tells Manolin that on the next day, he will venture far out into the Gulf Stream to fish being confident that his unlucky past is near its end. Thus on the eighty-fifth day, Santiago ventures alone, taking his skiff far onto the Gulf Stream. He sets his lines and, by noon of the first day, a big fish that he is sure is a marlin takes his bait. Unable to pull in the great marlin, Santiago instead finds the fish pulling his skiff. Two days and two nights pass in this manner, during which the old man bears the tension of the

line with his body. Though he is wounded by the struggle and in pain, Santiago expresses a sympathy for his antagonist (marlin), often referring to him as a brother. He also determines that because of the fish's great dignity, no one will be worthy of eating the marlin. On the third day of the battle, the fish begins to circle the skiff, indicating his tiredness to the old man. Santiago, now completely exhausted and almost in delirium, uses all the strength he has left in him to pull the fish onto its side and stab the marlin with a harpoon, ending the long battle between the old man and the fish. Santiago straps the marlin to the side of his skiff and returns home, thinking about the high price the fish will bring him at the market and how many people he will feed. While Santiago continues his journey back to the shore, sharks are attracted to the blood left by the marlin in the water. The first, a great shark, Santiago kills with his harpoon, but then he loses that weapon. He makes a new harpoon by fixing his knife to the end of an oar to help killing of sharks; in total, five sharks are killed and many others are driven away. But the sharks kept coming, and by sunset the sharks have almost eaten the marlin entirely, leaving a skeleton consisting mostly of its backbone, its tail and its head. Finally reaching the shore before dawn on the next day, Santiago struggles on the way to his shack, carrying the mast on his shoulder. At home, he slumps onto his bed and falls into a deep sleep. A group of fishermen gather the next day around the boat where the fish's skeleton is still attached. One of the fishermen measures it to be 18 feet (5.5 m) from nose to tail. Tourists at the nearby café mistakenly take it for a shark. Manolin, worried during the old man's venture, cries upon finding him safe asleep. The boy brings him newspapers and coffee. When the old man wakes, they promise to fish together once again. Upon his return to sleep, Santiago dreams of his youth—of lions on an African beach.

## MAIN THEMES

'**A man can be destroyed but not defeated.**' , this line sums up the main theme in the story. Hemingway suggests that, although a person may lose everything in the process of living, but being skillful, brave, and ambitious results the final triumph of the human spirit. Hemingway rejects the traditional happy ending in which Santiago, the poor old fisherman, would bring home the great fish and sell it for a large amount of money at market. Instead, Santiago brings only the bare skeleton of the marlin into port, earning no money yet getting a far greater prize: rather than triumphing over nature, he achieves oneness with it.

Other important theme in this novel centers on **the relationship between Santiago and Manolin**. The old man teaches the boy many important things like how to fish, and how to live with wisdom and dignity, on the other hand, the old man also has great need for the boy, especially when he is alone at sea and fishes the great fish. During his trying experience with the marlin, the old man repeatedly says, 'I wish I had the boy. To help me and to see this.' The thematic statement, 'No one should be alone in their old age,' refers to the old man's loneliness and emphasizes the characters' relationship of respect and love.

Another major theme is **the oneness with nature**. Santiago loves and respects the fish that he kills. The old man finds it difficult to express the paradoxical love he feels for the fish: *'I do not understand these things,' he thinks, 'but it is good that we do not have to try to kill the sun or the moon or the stars. It is enough to live on the sea and kill our true brothers'*. Santiago also speaks to and loves the flying fish, the dolphins, and the noble marlin. The sea is also a part of the nature, perhaps the major presence in the book. Santiago thinks of the sea as a woman, thinks

of it 'as *la mar* ,which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her,' while the younger fisherman think of the sea as the masculine' *el mar* ' and consider it '*a contestant or a place or even an enemy.*'

### **Character analysis**

**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 experiences in fishing, he has been unable to catch a fish for eighty-four days. He is humble, yet shows 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 challenge to test his strength and endurance. The marlin with which he struggles for three days represents his greatest challenge. Paradoxically, although Santiago ultimately loses the fish, the marlin is also his greatest victory.

**The marlin** - Santiago hooks the marlin, which measures eighteen feet, on the first afternoon of his fishing voyage. Because of the marlin's great size, Santiago is unable to pull the fish in, and the two become engaged in a struggle. The fishing line serves as a symbol of the fraternal connection Santiago feels with the fish. When the captured marlin is later destroyed by sharks, Santiago feels destroyed as well.

**Manolin** - Manolin is Santiago's apprentice and assistant. The old man first took him out on a boat when he was merely five years old. Because of Santiago's recent bad luck, Manolin's parents have forced the boy to go out on a different fishing boat. Manolin, however, still cares deeply for the old man, to whom he continues to look as a advisor. His love for

Santiago is unmistakable as the two discuss baseball and as the young boy asks help from villagers to improve the old man's poor conditions.

**Joe DiMaggio** - Although DiMaggio never appears in the novel, even so he plays a significant role. Santiago worships him as a model of strength and commitment, and his thoughts turn toward DiMaggio whenever he needs to reassure himself of his own strength. Despite a painful bone spur that might have crippled another player, DiMaggio went on to secure a triumphant career. He was a center fielder for the New York Yankees from 1936 to 1951, and is often considered the best all-around player ever at that position.

## **CONFLICT**

### **Protagonist**

Santiago, the old Cuban fisherman, is the protagonist. Though he is unlucky in not having caught a single fish in eighty-four days, he is still happy and optimistic, full with self-confidence and bravery in the face of the most difficult circumstances. He wins the sympathy and admiration of the reader for his qualities of love and humbleness under pressure. Although he loses his giant fish, Santiago is still a winner.

### **Antagonist**

The antagonist is the sea, a symbol of life, which steals from Santiago his final victory. The real antagonist in the sea is the group of sharks that eat the giant fish. Since the sea also provide the old fisherman with his living,

he sees the sea more as a challenge than an enemy. The sea also enables Santiago to show supreme endurance.

### **Climax**

The climax in the story occurs when Santiago kills the fish and its blood attracts the eager sharks nearby. His hopes of taking home his huge fish are gone when the sharks attack and eat the fish.

### **The ending**

On the level of the simple plot, the story ends as a tragedy because the sharks eat greedily the old man's prize (marlin) while on a deeper symbolic level, the old man becomes heroic. He has conquered the sea (life) and the sharks (life's cruel problems) by proving that mankind has the capacity to fight, to show grace under pressure, to survive, and to win, no matter how big the battle. The personal victory is all-important, and it becomes unimportant whether man obtains the visible prize.

### **The importance of the dream of the Lions on the Beach**

Santiago dreams his pleasant dream of the lions playing 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, wild animals, playing, his dream suggests a harmony between the opposing forces—life and death, love and hate, destruction and regeneration—of nature.

