



# *The Old Man and the Sea*

(1952)

## PLOT

This is a very short novel but it contains all the major themes of Hemingway's work. It is a twofold narrative developing both on a realistic and mythical level. On the purely realistic level, it is the story of **an old Cuban fisherman, Santiago**, who is taken care of by a young boy, Manolin. One day Santiago succeeds in catching **an enormous marlin in the middle of the ocean**. While he is sailing home with the fish, the marlin's blood leaves a trail in the water and attracts sharks. The fisherman has to fight the sharks that attack the fish. In the struggle, he loses the harpoon and rope but cannot prevent them from leaving him only a carcass. Although Manolin is not with the old man during his journey, he provides Santiago with his primary inspiration to resist and is the only one who understands the tragedy that he has been through by the end of the novel.

## SETTING

Santiago's experience takes place **outside the framework of the urban world** and its institutions. It may be read as an examination of the harmony and the struggle that exists between man and nature. It tries to show that even a simple man can overcome the struggles in life with dignity and courage. Life is a struggle to be borne, not like a burden, but as a challenge.

## THE PROTAGONIST

The protagonist is the emblematic male hero who is defeated, even if there is no original traumatic wound, no war as the cause. Like the classic heroes, **Santiago** is very **strong, brave and has moral certainty**; also like those heroes he has a tragic **flaw, pride**, that leads to his eventual downfall. However, Santiago is deeply aware of it: after sharks have destroyed the marlin, he apologises to his worthy opponent.

Hemingway does not condemn Santiago for his pride. On the contrary, his hero is the proof that **pride and ambition motivate men to achieve greatness**. Pride and determination are what makes Santiago meet the challenge

and fight with the marlin till the end. The decision to act, to fight, to never give up, enables Santiago to avoid defeat. Even though he returns home without a trophy, he acquires the knowledge that he has acquitted himself honourably.

## THEMES

Santiago is an example of **the struggle of man against bad luck**. The pride in his abilities, his knowledge of the sea and its creatures and of his craft, help him maintain hope when facing his greatest challenge: catching the big marlin. It is perhaps endurance that matters most in a world in which man cannot avoid death and destruction because they are part of the natural order of things. Santiago believes that man can be destroyed but not defeated.

## STYLE

The language employed is **simple and natural**, and has the effect of directness and freshness. This is because Hemingway always chooses **concrete, specific words** belonging to the semantic areas of sea life and the old man's hardships. He uses **direct speech** as an **effective device to create real people** and **free direct speech** with no reporting clauses like 'he said' or 'she thought', to let the reader capture the immediacy of dialogue.

## INTERPRETATIONS

This story can be interpreted in two different ways.

- It is a **story about hunting**. The hunt has made Santiago and the marlin brothers; the suffering of the marlin becomes the fisherman's and the death of the fish is both the life of Santiago and his own death. Eat and be eaten, kill and be killed are the rules of nature.
- It is also a **story of a man against himself**. Victory and defeat are symbolic values. The old man has learnt that nature remains the place of destruction, so he tries to test and overcome his limit, that is, his old age, fighting against his death but acknowledging the inevitable destruction. Nature is not only out at sea: it is, first of all, inside the human soul, since man dies and dispenses death.

## COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

### 1 READ the texts and take notes about

- the main character, Santiago;
- what he believes;
- similarities and differences with classic heroes;
- the role of pride;
- man and nature;
- the style of the novel;
- two different interpretations.



## The marlin

*After eighty-four days of unfruitful fishing, Santiago, an old Cuban fisherman, sails far beyond the island's shallow coastal waters and ventures into the Gulf Stream managing to catch the big marlin.*

Ernest Hemingway  
*The Old Man and the Sea*  
(1952)

It was on the third turn that he saw the fish first.

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.'

5 But he was that big and at the end of this circle he came to the surface only thirty yards away and the man saw his tail out of water. It was higher than a big scythe blade<sup>1</sup> and a very pale lavender above the dark blue water. It raked back<sup>2</sup> and as the fish swam just below the surface the old man could see his huge bulk and the purple stripes<sup>3</sup> that banded him<sup>4</sup>. His dorsal fin<sup>5</sup> was down and his huge pectorals were spread wide.

10 On this circle the old man could see the fish's eye and the two grey sucking fish that swam around him. Sometimes they attached themselves to him. Sometimes they darted off<sup>6</sup>. Sometimes they would swim easily in his shadow. They were each over three feet long and when they swam fast they lashed<sup>7</sup> their whole bodies like eels<sup>8</sup>.

The old man was sweating now but from something else besides the sun. On each calm placid turn the fish made he was gaining line and he was sure that in two turns more he would have a chance to get the harpoon in.

But I must get him close, close, close, he thought. I mustn't try for the head. I must get the heart.

'Be calm and strong, old man,' he said.

20 On the next circle the fish's back was out but he was a little too far from the boat. On the next circle he was still too far away but he was higher out of water and the old man was sure that by gaining some more line he could have him alongside.

He had rigged<sup>9</sup> his harpoon long before and its coil<sup>10</sup> of light rope was in a round basket and the end was made fast to the bitt<sup>11</sup> in the bow<sup>12</sup>.

25 The fish was coming in on his circle now calm and beautiful-looking and only his great tail moving. The old man pulled on him all that he could to bring him closer. For just a moment the fish turned a little on his side. Then he straightened himself and began another circle.

'I moved him,' the old man said. 'I moved him then.'

30 He felt faint<sup>13</sup> again now but he held on the great fish all the strain that he could. I moved him, he thought. Maybe this time I can get him over. Pull, hands, he thought. Hold up, legs. Last for me, head. Last for me. You never went. This time I'll pull him over.

35 But when he put all of his effort on, starting it well out before the fish came alongside and pulling with all his strength, the fish pulled part way over and then righted himself and swam away.

'Fish,' the old man said. 'Fish, you are going to have to die anyway. Do you have to kill me too?'

40 That way nothing is accomplished, he thought. His mouth was too dry to speak but he could not reach for the water now. I must get him alongside this time, he thought. I am not good for many more turns. Yes, you are, he told himself. You're good for ever.

On the next turn, he nearly had him. But again the fish righted himself and swam slowly away.

45 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.

Now you are getting confused in the head, he thought. You must keep your head clear. Keep your head clear and know how to suffer like a man. Or a fish, he thought.

- 1 scythe blade. Lama di una falce.
- 2 It raked back. Virò.
- 3 stripes. Striature.
- 4 banded him. Lo avvolgevano.
- 5 fin. Pinna.
- 6 they darted off. Guizzavano via.
- 7 they lashed. Agitavano violentemente.
- 8 eels. Anguille.
- 9 He had rigged. Aveva preparato.
- 10 coil. Rotolo.
- 11 bitt. Bitta (colonnina a cui si avvolgono i cavi di ormeggio).
- 12 bow. Prua.
- 13 faint. Debole.



‘Clear up, head,’ he said in a voice he could hardly hear. ‘Clear up.’  
 50 Twice more it was the same on the turns.  
 I do not know, the old man thought. He had been on the point of feeling himself go  
 each time. I do not know. But I will try it once more.  
 He tried it once more and he felt himself going when he turned the fish. The fish  
 righted himself and swam off again slowly with the great tail weaving in the air.  
 55 I’ll try it again, the old man promised, although his hands were mushy<sup>14</sup> now and he  
 could only see well in flashes.  
 He tried it again and it was the same. So, he thought, and he felt himself going  
 before he started; I will try it once again.  
 He took all his pain and what was left of his strength and his long gone pride and  
 60 he put it against the fish’s agony and the fish came over on to his side and swam gently  
 on his side, his bill<sup>15</sup> almost touching the planking of the skiff<sup>16</sup>, and started to pass the  
 boat, long, deep, wide, silver and barred<sup>17</sup> with purple and interminable in the water.  
 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  
 65 summoned<sup>18</sup>, 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. He felt the iron go in and he leaned<sup>19</sup> on it and drove  
 it further and then pushed all his weight after it.  
 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.

- 14 **mushy.** Senza forza.  
 15 **bill.** Muso, testa.  
 16 **skiff.** Barca di piccole dimensioni.  
 17 **barred.** Striato.  
 18 **summoned.** Chiamato a raccolta.  
 19 **he leaned.** Si appoggiò.

## LITERARY COMPETENCE

### > VOCABULARY

**1 READ** the text and match the highlighted words and phrases with their Italian translation.

- 1 larghezza, ampiezza .....
- 2 chiarisciti .....
- 3 sudando .....
- 4 si raddrizzò .....
- 5 fasciame .....
- 6 remore .....
- 7 lo fermerò .....
- 8 tenetevi su .....
- 9 si raddrizzò .....

### > COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

**2 READ** from line 1 to line 13 again and provide information as regards

- the setting in place;
- the two characters;
- the appearance of the marlin;
- what it is followed by.



**3 READ** the rest of the passage again and match the actions in the column on the left with their consequences in the column on the right.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 On each turn the fish made  | A but the fish swam away.                 |
| 2 The old man pulled with all his strength on the fish several times, | B and drove it down into the fish's side. |
| 3 In the end, the old fisherman lifted the harpoon                    | C and the marlin died.                    |
| 4 He pushed it with all his strength                                  | D the old man gained line.                |

➤ **COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT**

**4 DECIDE** if the narrator is a character of the story or an external voice.

**5 SAY** whose point of view the events are seen from. Mark the lines where Hemingway uses free indirect speech and direct speech to achieve this effect.

**6 UNDERLINE** words and expressions referring to Santiago's physical and psychological features. Which of the following adjectives would you use to describe him? Justify your choice.

sensitive	insincere	dreamy	experienced	loving	self-confident
gentle	insecure	immature	materialistic	concrete	detached

**7 DECIDE** if the great marlin can be considered a character. What psychological features does it have, if any?

**8 ANALYSE** the relationship between the marlin and the fisherman. Does it undergo a change during the passage?

**9 DEFINE** the language of this text. Tick as appropriate.

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Colloquial. | <input type="checkbox"/> Straightforward. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Literary.   | <input type="checkbox"/> Formal.          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Abstract.   | <input type="checkbox"/> Concrete.        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Precise.    | <input type="checkbox"/> Specialised.     |

**10 CIRCLE** some of the technical words concerning fishing. Part of the quality of Hemingway's language depends on his use of them. Define the effect they convey.

**11 DISCUSS.** This text lets the reader explore a symbolic world. State what the fisherman's struggle, the marlin, the fishing line and the sea are symbols of.

➤ **COMPETENCE: CONTRASTING AUTHORS**

**12 DISCUSS.** Santiago becomes involved in a struggle with a huge fish living in the middle of the ocean and apparently endowed with supernatural strength. Look for similarities and differences between this story and Melville's *Moby-Dick* (→ 5.18).



➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS

- 13 LOOK** at the picture *Gulf Stream* (1899) by the American naturalist painter Winslow Homer (1836-1910). What impressions does it arouse in your mind? Link the picture to the text you have analysed.



Winslow Homer, *The Gulf Stream*, 1899. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

➤ COMPETENCE: LINKING LITERATURE TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

- 14 DISCUSS.** Did you like this story? Do you know of any other story which has some features in common with this, both in literature and in the cinema?