
GRADE 9 ENGLISH STUDY GUIDE***The Old Man and the Sea***

by Ernest Hemingway

The Story

Set in the mid-twentieth century, *The Old Man and the Sea* begins and ends in a small village near Havana, Cuba. The real story, however, takes place far out in the Gulf Stream, where the main character, Santiago, wages his heroic battle against a great marlin. Santiago stays true to the Hemingway tradition; he is a hero who fights the great fish alone, relying on only his strength, his determination, and his skill.

Hemingway is often praised for his economy of style, his ability to say much in a few words. In fact, the book is less than 120 pages! However, even though there are few words, there is much hidden meaning in this text. Be sure to look carefully at each episode when you read. Note carefully what Santiago says and what Hemingway says about him. Ask yourself if a particular statement has a deeper meaning, one you might not have noticed at first. The book is short, so read slowly and thoughtfully.

The Author

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) was born and raised in Oak Park, Illinois. A high school football player and boxer, he spent his vacations hunting with his father in the Michigan woods. Later he became a reporter for *The Kansas City Star*. During World War I he was an ambulance driver, and while fighting in the Italian infantry, he was badly wounded.

Hemingway remained in Europe after the war and served as the Paris correspondent for *The Toronto Star*. It was during this time that he began to write his novels and short stories. Among his best known works are *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Hemingway continued his work as a war correspondent until after the Spanish Civil War and World War II. He then returned to the United States. In 1952, *The Old Man and the Sea* won him both the Pulitzer and the Nobel Prize for Literature. Indeed, many critics consider this novella his finest work, and most agree that it contains the essence of his unique outlook on life.

Hemingway's reputation as a novelist was enhanced by his adventurous, glamorous lifestyle, which was much like those of the characters in his novels. He was an avid fisherman, a big game hunter, a devotee of bullfighting, and a commander of a group in the French Resistance Movement during World War II. In fact, Hemingway was a celebrity even to those who had never read any of his works. After World War II he lived in Cuba until Castro seized control of the island. He lived for a while in Key West and then moved to his ranch in Idaho, where he committed suicide in 1961 after several severe bouts with depression.

Read the remainder of the study guide after you finish reading the novel.

Nature

One of the most obvious aspects of the novel is its concern with nature. Hemingway portrays nature as a **continuum** – an endless process of creation and destruction which is ultimately balanced in perfect harmony. Within this continuum each living thing pursues its destiny according to instinct (the law of nature). Thus, Santiago eats the turtle's eggs throughout the summer in order to build his strength for the big fish of early autumn, and while struggling with the great marlin, he takes nourishment from the sea in the form of tuna, dolphin, and flying fish. And yet, once he has conquered the giant fish, Santiago must defend it against the sharks. In the end, there is almost nothing left. Hemingway sums up the bitter justice in nature's law when he says, "The shark was not an accident." Indeed, the sharks are the inevitable result of Santiago's killing the marlin in deep waters. Thus, while nature may bestow great gifts on humans, she can easily take them away. In the end, she is true only to her own law—the overall harmony of the universe in which humans play only a small part.

Santiago feels a connection with nature. The distance he travels at sea to catch the marlin emphasizes his separation from the human world and his closeness with the natural world. Once he physically

connects himself to the fish, they become like blood brothers. "‘Fish,’ he said softly, aloud, ‘I’ll stay with you until I am dead.’" Santiago speaks with all the animals he encounters, eats animals to stay alive, and also considers some animals as his friends. The journey through nature, where Santiago is bound to the great fish, brings Santiago to a new understanding of himself and his place in the world.

Think about these questions at the end of the novel:

Will Santiago soon die?

Is he mentally prepared to die?

What prepares him for his death?

The Dreams

The central dream in the story is of lions playing on a beach like young cats. The fight with the marlin is framed by these lion dreams—the dream occurs at the beginning and at the end of the journey. In many ways, the dream of bringing back the marlin is related to the dream of the lions. Think about the following questions as you read:

What words do you associate with lions?

Why are the lions young?

What was Santiago like when he was young?

What is Santiago like now?

Metaphorically, what might Santiago be trying to “bring back” from the sea? What does he actually bring back?

Spirit

The Old Man and the Sea is a story of triumph, not defeat. Although Santiago loses the marlin to the sharks, though his body is finally worn out and broken, his spirit is strong. He maintains his dignity in the face of impossible odds. Thus, the manner in which Santiago withstands his loss is a kind of victory in itself. Like the noble creatures he hunts (the marlin, the Mako shark, and the turtle with its lasting heart), Santiago rises above defeat through courage and endurance. From this perspective it is easy to understand his climactic statement: “A man can be destroyed but not defeated.”

Major Symbols

The great DiMaggio—Joe DiMaggio, the famous Yankee outfielder and Santiago’s personal hero. He represents humans’ abilities to perform difficult tasks with excellence in spite of physical pain.

The turtle’s heart—symbolic of courage and endurance because “it will beat for hours after (the turtle) has been cut up and butchered.”

The marlin—represents all of the heroic qualities which Santiago respects: courage, endurance, strength, and dignity.

The mako shark—*another* heroic symbol; possessing beauty, strength, fearlessness. He is the only shark Santiago respects.

The other sharks—represent the final, overwhelming odds against which a hero must struggle.

The cross—the greatest symbol of human suffering. The crucifixion imagery which appears in the last twenty pages of the novel links Santiago with Christ and, therefore, with the idea of the spiritual hero.

The dream of the lions—the lions symbolize the immortal virtues of strength, courage, and endurance. They are Santiago's most personal symbol, also associated with his past youth.

The Hemingway Hero

Through his numerous novels and short stories, Hemingway developed his own kind of hero. A man who depends only on himself, the Hemingway hero is completely self-reliant; he is a loner at heart. A lover of such sports as hunting and fishing, he is usually an expert in some area. Courageous and self-confident, he faces danger willingly because he believes that his worth as a man is measured by his ability to endure pain with bravery and dignity. Yet the Hemingway hero is rarely satisfied with himself or his accomplishments; he must prove himself again and again.

One of the most important characteristics of the Hemingway hero lies in his relationship with nature. This relationship can be best described as intimate (close and very personal). He is sensitive to nature and feels a deep appreciation for her sights, sounds, and smells. Participating in nature makes the Hemingway hero feel alive and refreshed, for nature offers him the opportunity to test his skills through such forms of competition as hunting and fishing. Yet, while he loves nature, the Hemingway hero feels a sincere respect for her laws. Thus, he accepts the inescapable violence in nature as a necessary part of her overall harmony. In fact, he views "personal" violence (healthy competition between two worthy opponents) as a necessary and beneficial aspect of life. By competing with an equally skilled opponent, the Hemingway hero can prove his manhood by truly testing his endurance, courage, and spirit. Indeed, he loves nothing more than a challenge of this sort. Therefore, although he fears death, as does any human, the Hemingway hero regards a fight to the death as the ultimate challenge of his worth, and he faces such a challenge with dignity.

Questions

1. How is Santiago described at the beginning of the novel? What strengths of character does he feel will enable him to catch a big fish?
2. Who is Joe DiMaggio? How is he similar to Santiago?
3. What is Santiago's attitude towards the birds he sees out at sea? Toward the turtles? The Marlin? The Mako shark (also called dentuso)? The galanos? The lions?
4. What name does Santiago call the sea? What name do the young fishermen use? What is the difference?
5. Find and underline passages on pages 52-59 which illustrate Santiago's determination to catch the marlin.
6. Explain the episode involving the great negro from Cienfuegos. What does it illustrate about Santiago's youth? What name is given to him after this?
7. What does Santiago mean when he says, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated"?
8. How does Santiago react to the sharks on page 107? Is there anything familiar in the comparison used in the second paragraph? Can you find similar comparisons on pages 121 - 127? To whom is Santiago being compared?
9. How does Santiago battle the sharks? What weapons does he use? What does this tell you about him?
10. What does Santiago give to Manolin at the end of the novel? What possible significance might this have? What is he really "passing on" to Manolin?
11. How do the tourists react to the skeleton at the end of the novel? What misconception do they have? What do you think this says about Santiago's great achievement?
12. How would you interpret the last paragraph of the novel? What do you think happens to Santiago? What do the lions seem to represent?
13. What characteristics of the Hemingway hero do you see in Santiago?
14. Is Santiago's story tragic? Why or why not?