

## About the Old Man and the Sea

*The Old Man and the Sea* is a novella (just over 100 pages in length) by Ernest Hemingway, written in Cuba in 1951 and published in 1952. It was the last major work of fiction to be produced by Hemingway and published in his lifetime. One of his most famous works, it centers upon Santiago, an aging Cuban fisherman who struggles with a giant marlin far out in the Gulf Stream. It is noteworthy in twentieth century fiction, reaffirming Hemingway's worldwide literary prominence as well as being a significant factor in his selection for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954.

Most people maintain that the years following Hemingway's publication of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940 until 1952 were the bleakest in his literary career. The novel *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950) was almost unanimously disparaged by critics as self-parody. Evidently his participation as an Allied correspondent in World War II did not yield fruits equivalent to those wrought of his experiences in World War I (*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929) or the Spanish Civil War (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*).

Santiago's story was originally conceived as part of a larger work, including material that later appeared in *Islands in the Stream*. This larger work, which Hemingway referred to as "The Sea Book," was proving difficult, so when Hemingway received positive reviews for the Santiago story alone, he decided to allow it to be published independently. He wrote to publisher Charles Scribner in October 1951 – "This is the prose that I have been working for all my life, that should read easily and simply and seem short, and yet have all the dimensions of the visible world and the world of man's spirit." *The Old Man and the Sea*, published in its entirety in one edition of *Life* magazine, was an instant success. In two days the September 1st edition of *Life* sold 5,300,000 copies and the book version sold 153,000. The novella soared to the top of the best-seller list and remained there for six months.

At first, critical reception was warm. Many hailed it as Hemingway's best work, and no less than William Faulkner said, "Time may show it to be the best single piece of any of us, I mean his and my contemporaries." Others, however, complained of artificiality in the characterization and excess sentimentality. Despite these detractors, *The Old Man and the Sea* was awarded the 1953 Pulitzer Prize and American Academy of Arts and Letters' Award of Merit Medal for the Novel, and played a significant role in Hemingway's selection for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. The book is a novella because it has no chapters or parts, and is slightly longer than a short story.

The popular reception of the novel comes from its part-parable, part-eulogy style, recollecting a by-gone age in his spiritual quest for discovery. Touching and powerful in turns, the story is told in Hemingway's simple, brittle style. The book reaches out to a very human need – for stability and certainty.

## Synopsis

*The Old Man and the Sea* recounts an epic battle between an old, experienced fisherman and a giant marlin said to be the largest catch of his life. It opens by explaining that the fisherman, who is named Santiago, has gone 84 days without catching any fish at all. He is apparently so unlucky that his young apprentice, Manolin, has been forbidden by his parents to sail with the old man and been ordered to fish with more successful fishermen. Still dedicated to the old man, however, the boy visits Santiago's shack each night, hauling back his fishing gear, feeding him and discussing American baseball — most notably Santiago's idol, Joe DiMaggio. Santiago tells Manolin that on the next day, he will venture far out into the Gulf to fish, confident that his unlucky streak is near its end.

Santiago sleeps and dreams of Africa where he traveled as a shipmate in his youth. "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 – and lions on the beach." Early the next morning, the old man wakes and retrieves the boy from his house. The two take the old man's supplies from his shack to his boat, and enjoy coffee at an early morning place that serves fishermen. Once again, Santiago goes out to sea.

"He 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." Moving well, Santiago spots flying fish and birds – expressing great sympathy for the latter. As he queries, "Why did they make birds so delicate and fine as those sea swallows, when the ocean can be so cruel? She is kind and very beautiful. But she can be so cruel."

Santiago presses on. He sees a man-of-war bird overhead and notices that the bird has spied something in the water. The old man rows near the bird, and drops his lines hoping to capture the fish the bird has seen. There is a large school of dolphin traveling fast, too fast for either the bird or Santiago to capture. Santiago moves on, hoping to catch a stray or perhaps even discover a marlin tracking the school. He catches a small tuna – and then feels a bite on one of his deeper lines.

The first bite is hard, and the stick to which the line is connected drops sharply. The next tug is more tentative, but Santiago knows exactly what it is. "One hundred fathoms down a marlin was eating the sardines that covered the point and shank of the hand-forged hook that held the small tuna." Encouraged by a bite at so deep a depth – so far out in the Gulf, Santiago reasons that the fish must be very large.

The marlin nibbles around the hook for some time, refusing to take the bait fully. Santiago speaks aloud, as if to cajole the fish into accepting the bait. He says, "Come on – make another turn. Just smell them. Aren't they lovely? Eat them good now – hard and cold and lovely. Don't be shy fish. Eat them." After many false bites, the marlin finally takes the tuna and pulls out a great length of line.

Santiago waits a bit for the marlin to swallow the hook and then pulls hard on the line to bring the marlin up to the surface. The fish is strong, and does not come up. Instead, he swims away, dragging the old man and his skiff along behind. Santiago wishes he had Manolin with him to help. As the sun goes down, the marlin continues on in the same direction, and Santiago loses sight of land altogether. Expressing his resolve, Santiago says, "Fish, I love you and respect you very much, but I will kill you dead before this day ends."

A small bird lands on the boat, and while Santiago is speaking to the bird, the marlin lurches forward and pulls the old man down, cutting his hand. Lowering his hand to water to clean it, Santiago notices that the marlin has slowed down. He decides to eat a tuna he has caught in order to give him strength for the fight. As he is cutting the fish, his left hand cramps. Speaking out loud, Santiago says, "What kind of hand is that. Cramp then if you want. Make yourself into a claw – It will do you no good." The old man eats the tuna, hoping it will renew his strength and help release his hand.

Suddenly, the marlin breaches the surface and descends into the water again. Santiago is amazed by its size – two feet longer than the skiff. He quickly realizes that the marlin could destroy the boat and says, "thank God they are not as intelligent as we who kill them – although they are more noble and more able." Santiago prays to assuage his worried heart, and settles into the chase once again.

As the sun sets, Santiago thinks back to triumphs of his past. He remembers a great arm-wrestling match he had at a tavern in Casablanca. It had lasted a full day and a night, but Santiago – El Campeón as he was known then, eventually won. "He decided that he could beat anyone if he wanted to badly enough, and he decided that it was bad for his right hand for fishing." He tried to wrestle with his left hand, but it was a traitor then as it had been now.

Recalling his exhaustion, Santiago decides that he must sleep some if he is to kill the marlin. He cuts up the dolphin he has caught to prevent spoiling, and eats some of it before contriving a way to sleep. He wraps the line around his back and leans against the bow, leaving his left hand on the rope to wake him if the marlin lurches. Soon, the old man is asleep, dreaming of a school of porpoises, his village house, and finally of the lions of his youth on the African beach.

Santiago wakes to the line rushing furiously through his right hand. The marlin leaps out of the water and it's all the old man can do to hold onto the line, now cutting his hand badly and dragging him down to the bottom of the skiff. Santiago finds his balance, and realizes that the marlin has filled the air sacks on his back and therefore cannot go deep to die. The marlin will circle – and then the endgame will begin.

At sunrise, the marlin begins a large circle. Santiago holds the line strongly, pulling it in slowly as the marlin goes round. At the third turn, Santiago sees the fish and is again amazed by its size. He readies the harpoon and pulls the line in more. The marlin tries desperately to pull away. Santiago, no longer able to speak for lack of water, thinks, "You are killing me, fish – 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 you.” The marlin continues to circle, coming closer and pulling away. At last it is next to the skiff, and Santiago drives his harpoon into the marlin's chest.

“Then the fish came alive, with his death in him, and rose high out of the water showing all his great length and all his power and his beauty.” It crashed into the sea, blinding Santiago with a shower of sea spray. Before him, Santiago saw the slain beast laying on its back, crimson blood flowing into the azure water.

Having killed the Marlin, Santiago says, “I am a tired old man. But I have killed this fish which is my brother and now I must do the slave work.” Santiago lashes the fish alongside his skiff. He pulls a line through the marlin's gills and out its mouth, keeping its head near the bow. “I want to see him, he thought, and to touch and to feel him. He is my fortune.” Having secured the marlin to the skiff, Santiago draws the sail and lets the trade winds push him toward the southwest – and home.

After an hour, a mako shark appears. It had followed the trail of blood the slain marlin has left in its wake. As the shark approaches the boat, Santiago prepares his harpoon, hoping to kill the shark before it tears into the marlin. “The shark's head was out of water and his back was coming out and the old man could hear the noise of skin and flesh ripping on the big fish when he rammed the harpoon down onto the shark's head.” The dead shark sinks slowly into the deep ocean water.

Two hours later, two shovel-nosed sharks. After losing his harpoon to the mako, Santiago fastens his knife to the end of the oar and now wields this against the sharks. He kills the first shark easily, but while he does this, the other shark is tearing at the marlin underneath the boat. Santiago lets go of the sheet to swing broadside and reveal the shark underneath. After some struggle, he kills the other assailant.

Santiago apologizes to the fish for the mutilation he has suffered. He admits, “I shouldn't have gone out so far fish – neither for you nor for me. I am sorry, fish.” Tired and losing hope, Santiago sits and waits for the next attacker, a single shovel-nosed shark. The old man succeeds in killing the fish, but breaks his knife blade in the process.

More sharks appear at sunset and Santiago has only a club with which to beat them away. He does not kill the sharks, but damages them enough to deter their attack. Santiago regrets not having cleaved off the marlin's sword to use as a weapon when he had the knife and apologizes again to the fish. At around ten o'clock, he sees the light of Havana and steers toward it.

During the night, the sharks return. “By midnight he fought and this time he knew the fight was useless. They came in a pack and he could only see the lines in the water their fins made and their phosphorescence as they threw themselves on the fish.” He clubs desperately at the fish, but the club too was soon taken away by a shark. Santiago grabs the tiller and attacks the sharks until the tiller breaks. “That was the last shark of the pack that came. There was nothing more for them to eat.”

Santiago, “sailed lightly now and he had no thoughts, nor any feelings of any kind.” He concentrates purely on steering homeward and ignores the sharks that come to gnaw on

the marlin's bones. When he arrives at the harbor, everyone is asleep. Santiago steps out of the boat, carrying the mast as always back to his shack. "He started to climb again and at the top he fell and lay for some time with the mast across his shoulder. He tried to get up, but it was too difficult, and he sat there with the mast on his shoulder and looked at the road." When he finally arose, he had to sit five times before reaching home. Arriving at his shack, Santiago collapses on his bed and falls asleep.

The next morning, Manolin arrives at the shack while Santiago is still asleep. The boy leaves quickly to get some coffee, crying on his way to the Terrace cafe. Manolin sees fisherman gathered around the skiff, measuring the marlin at eighteen feet long. When Manolin returns to the shack, Santiago is awake. The two speak for a while, and Manolin says, "Now we will fish together again," to which Santiago replies, "No. I am not lucky. I am not lucky anymore." Manolin objects, "The hell with luck – I'll bring the luck with me." Santiago quietly acquiesces, and Manolin leaves to fetch food and a clean shirt.

That afternoon there are tourists on the Terrace. A female tourist sees the skeleton of the marlin moving in the tide. Not recognizing the skeleton, she asks the waiter what it is. He responds in broken English – "eshark," thinking she wants to know what happened. She comments to her partner that she didn't know sharks had such beautiful tails. Meanwhile, back in Santiago's shack, the old man, "was still sleeping on his face and the boy was sitting by him watching him."

The old man was dreaming about lions.

## **Characters**

### **Santiago**

Santiago is the protagonist. He is an old fisherman in Cuba who, when we meet him at the beginning of the book, has not caught anything for eighty-four days. The novella follows Santiago's quest for the great catch that will save his career. Santiago endures a great struggle with an uncommonly large and noble marlin, only to lose the fish to rapacious sharks on his way back to land. Despite this loss, Santiago ends the novel with his spirit undefeated.

### **Manolin**

Manolin is Santiago's only friend and companion. Santiago taught Manolin to fish, and the boy used to go out to sea with the old man until his parents objected to Santiago's bad luck. Manolin still helps Santiago pull in his boat in the evenings and provides the old man with food and bait when he needs it. Manolin is the reader's surrogate in the novel, appreciating Santiago's heroic spirit and skill, despite his outward lack of success.

### **The Marlin**

Although he does not speak and we do not have access to his thoughts, the marlin is certainly an important character in the novella. The marlin is the fish Santiago spends the

majority of the novel tracking, killing, and attempting to bring to shore. The marlin is larger and more spirited than any Santiago has ever seen. Santiago idealizes the marlin, ascribing to it traits of great nobility, a fish to which he must prove his own nobility if he is to be worthy enough to catch it.

## **The Sea**

As its title suggests, the sea is central character in the novella. Most of the story takes place at sea, and Santiago is constantly identified with it and its creatures. His sea-colored eyes reflect both the sea's tranquility and power, and its inhabitants are his brothers. Santiago refers to the sea as a woman, and the sea seems to represent the feminine complement to Santiago's masculinity.

## **Inspiration for Santiago**

While Hemingway was living in Cuba beginning in 1940 with his third wife Martha Gellhorn, one of his favorite pastimes was to sail and fish in his boat, named the *Pilar*. General biographical consensus holds that the model for Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* was, at least in part, the Cuban fisherman Gregorio Fuentes.

Fuentes, also known as Goyo to his friends, was born in 1897 on Lanzarote in the Canary Islands, migrated to Cuba when he was six years old and met Hemingway there in 1928. In the 1930s, Hemingway hired him to look after his boat. During Hemingway's Cuban years a strong friendship formed between Hemingway and Fuentes. For almost thirty years, Fuentes served as the captain of the *Pilar*.

## **The Author**

Ernest Hemmingway may have done more to change the style of English prose than any other writer in the twentieth century. He wrote in short, declarative sentences and was known for his tough, terse prose. Publication of *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* immediately established Hemmingway as one of the greatest literary lights of his time. As part of the expatriate community in 1920's Paris, the former journalist and World War I ambulance driver began a career that led to international fame.

Hemmingway was an aficionado of bullfighting and big-game hunting, and his main protagonists were always men and women of courage and conviction. As a journalist, he covered the Spanish Civil War, portraying it in fiction in his brilliant novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. *The Old Man and the Sea* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1953. He died in 1961.