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**Literary significance of the Novel The Old Man and the Sea by** [**Ernest Hemingway**](http://www.gradesaver.com/author/ernest-hemingway)

**Summary**

There is an old fisherman in Cuba called [Santiago](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-old-man-and-the-sea/study-guide/character-list#santiago), who has gone eighty-four days without a catch. He is "thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck...and his hands had deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert" (10). Santiago's lack of success, though, does not destroy his spirit, and he has "cheerful and undefeated" eyes (10).

He has a single friend, a boy named [Manolin](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-old-man-and-the-sea/study-guide/character-list#manolin), who helped him during the first forty days of his dryspell. After forty days, though, Manolin's parents decide the old man was unlucky and ordered their son to join another boat. Despite this, the boy helps the old man to bring in his empty boat every day.

After earning money on the other boat, Manolin asks Santiago if he can return to the old man's service. Santiago refuses the boy, telling him to mind his parents and to stay with the successful boat. Santiago tells Manolin that tomorrow he will go out far in the Gulf to fish. Manolin says that he will try to convince his new employer, who is nearly blind, to fish near Santiago the next day. That way, if Santiago catches a big fish, Manolin and his new employer can help Santiago manage it.

Manolin offers to fetch sardines for the old man, an offer which Santiago first refuses and then accepts. Hemingway tells us that "[Santiago] was too simple to wonder when he had attained humility. But he knew he had attained it and he knew it was not disgraceful and it carried no loss of true pride" (14).

The two gather Santiago's things from his boat and go to the old man's house. His house is a very simple shack with a bed, table, and chair on a dirt floor. There are also religious pictures and a tinted photograph on the wall, relics of his wife. The picture that used to hang on the wall of Santiago's wife had been taken down, since it made him too lonely to look at it.

At the house, the two rehearse a nightly ritual of speaking about fictitious rice and fish and a cast net. They sold the cast net long ago, but they still insist on speaking of it as if it is there. The boy decides to go out to get the sardines for them to eat.

Santiago then pulls out a paper and the two discuss baseball, speaking with great enthusiasm of Joe DiMaggio. Santiago tells Manolin not to fear the Cleveland Indians, but to have faith in the Yankees and trust in DiMaggio. He tells Manolin that eighty-five is a lucky number, and since tomorrow is "the eighty-fifth day" that he will have gone without a catch, maybe they should buy a lottery ticket with that number. Manolin leaves the house and Santiago falls asleep.

**Analysis**

The first sentence of the book announces itself as Hemingway's: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish" (9). The words are plain, and the structure, two tightly-worded independent clauses conjoined by a simple conjunction, is ordinary, traits which characterize Hemingway's literary style. While in other works this economy of language is used to convey the immediacy of experience, Hemingway's terseness is heightened here to the point of rendering much of the prose empty on one level and pregnant with meaning on the other; that is, the sentences tend to lose their particular connection to reality but at the same time attain a more general, symbolic character, much like the effect of poetry. Hemingway's style, then, helps explain why so many commentators view his novella more as a fable than as fiction.

The use of the number forty in the next sentence is the first of many religious allusions in the novella. We are told that after forty days (the length of time it took Christ to subdue Satan in the desert), Manolin's parents decided that "the old man was now and definitely salao, which is the worst form of unlucky" (9). This sentence proclaims one of the novel's themes, the heroic struggle against unchangeable fate. Indeed, the entire first paragraph emphasizes Santiago's apparent lack of success. For example, "It made the boy sad to see the old man come in each day with his skiff empty." And most powerfully, "The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat" (9).

This type of descriptive degradation of Santiago continues with details of his old, worn body. Even his scars, legacies of past successes, are "old as erosions in a fishless desert" (10). All this changes suddenly, though, when Hemingway says masterfully, "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated" (10). This draws attention to a dichotomy between two different types of success: outer, material success and inner, spiritual success. While Santiago clearly lacks the former, the import of this lack is eclipsed by his possession of the later. This triumph of indefatigable spirit over exhaustible material resources is another important theme of the novel. Also, Santiago's eye color foreshadows Hemingway's increasingly explicit likening of Santiago to the sea, suggesting an analogy between Santiago's indomitable spirit and the sea's boundless strength.

The relationship between Santiago and Manolin can be summed up in one sentence: "The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him" (10). Manolin is Santiago's apprentice, but their relationship is not restricted to business alone. Manolin idolizes Santiago but the object of this idolization is not only the once great though presently failed fisherman; it is an idolization of ideals. This helps explain Manolin's unique, almost religious devotion to the old man, underscored when Manolin begs Santiago's pardon for his not fishing with the old man anymore. Manolin says, "It was Papa made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him," to which Santiago replies, "I know... It is quite normal. He hasn't much faith" (10).

Despite the clear hierarchy of this teacher/student relationship, Santiago does stress his equality with the boy. When Manolin asks to buy the old man a beer, Santiago replies, "Why not?... Between fisherman" (11). And when Manolin asks to help Santiago with his fishing, Santiago replies, "You are already a man" (12). By demonstrating that Santiago has little more to teach the boy, this equality foreshadows the impending separation of the two friends, and also indicates that this will not be a story about a young boy learning from an old man, but a story of an old man learning the unique lessons of the autumn of life.

A similar type of unexpected equality comes out when Hemingway describes the various ways marlins and sharks are treated on shore. While this foreshadows the struggle between Santiago's marlin and the sharks, it is also equalizes the participants. Despite the battles at sea, the marlins and sharks are both butchered and used by humans on land; their antagonisms mean nothing on shore. Like the case of Santiago and Manolin, this equalization demonstrates the novella's thematic concern with the unity of nature - including humanity - a unity which ultimately helps succor the heroic victim of great tragedy.

Hemingway also peppers the novella with numerous references to sight. We are told, for instance, that Santiago has uncannily good eyesight for a man of his age and experience, while Manolin's new employer is nearly blind. When Manolin notices this, Santiago replies simply, "I am a strange old man" (14). Given the previously mentioned analogy between Santiago's eyes and the sea, one suspects that his strangeness in this regard has something to do with his relationship to the sea. This connection, though, is somewhat problematic as it might suggest that Santiago would have success as a fisherman. Santiago's exact relation to the sea, though, will be taken up in later chapters.

The simplicity of Santiago's house further develops our view of Santiago as materially unsuccessful. It is interesting that Hemingway draws attention to the relics of Santiago's wife in his house, presenting an aspect of Santiago which is otherwise absent throughout the novel. This is significant because it suggests a certain completeness to Santiago's character which makes him more of an Everyman - appropriate for an allegory - but mentioning it simply to remove it from the stage makes its absence even more noteworthy, and one might question whether the character of Santiago is too roughly drawn to allow the reader to fully identify with his story.

***The Old Man and the Sea*** is a short novel written by the American author [Ernest Hemingway](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernest_Hemingway) in 1951 in [Bimini, Bahamas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bimini,_Bahamas), and published in 1952.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-Time-1) It was the last major work of fiction by Hemingway that was published during his lifetime. One of his most famous works, it tells the story of Santiago, an aging [Cuban](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cubans) [fisherman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fisherman) who struggles with a giant [marlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marlin) far out in the [Gulf Stream](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulf_Stream) off the coast of Florida.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-nobel-2)

In 1953, *The Old Man and the Sea* was awarded the [Pulitzer Prize for Fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulitzer_Prize_for_Fiction), and it was cited by the [Nobel Committee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nobel_Committee) as contributing to their awarding of the [Nobel Prize in Literature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nobel_Prize_in_Literature) to Hemingway in 1954.[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-nobel-2)

## Plot summary

*The Old Man and the Sea* tells the story of a battle between an aging, experienced fisherman, Santiago, and a large [marlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marlin). The story opens with Santiago having gone 84 days without catching a fish, and now being seen as "*salao*",[[a]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-4) the worst form of unluckiness. He is so unlucky that his young apprentice, Manolin, has been forbidden by his parents to sail with him and has been told instead to fish with successful fishermen. The boy visits Santiago's shack each night, hauling his fishing gear, preparing food, talking about American baseball and his favorite player, [Joe DiMaggio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_DiMaggio). Santiago tells Manolin that on the next day, he will venture far out into the Gulf Stream, north of [Cuba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba) in the [Straits of Florida](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straits_of_Florida) to fish, confident that his unlucky streak is near its end.

On the eighty-fifth day of his unlucky streak, Santiago takes his [skiff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skiff) into the Gulf Stream, sets his lines and, by noon, has his bait taken by a big fish that he is sure is a [marlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marlin). Unable to haul in the great marlin, Santiago is instead pulled by the marlin, and two days and nights pass with Santiago holding onto the line. Though wounded by the struggle and in pain, Santiago expresses a compassionate appreciation for his adversary, often referring to him as a brother. He also determines that, because of the fish's great dignity, no one shall deserve to eat the marlin.

On the third day, the fish begins to circle the skiff. Santiago, worn out and almost delirious, uses all his remaining strength to pull the fish onto its side and stab the marlin with a [harpoon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harpoon). Santiago straps the marlin to the side of his skiff and heads home, thinking about the high price the fish will bring him at the market and how many people he will feed.

On his way in to shore, [sharks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shark) are attracted to the marlin's blood. Santiago kills a great [mako shark](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mako_shark) with his harpoon, but he loses the weapon. He makes a new harpoon by strapping his knife to the end of an [oar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oar) to help ward off the next line of sharks; five sharks are slain and many others are driven away. But the sharks keep coming, and by nightfall the sharks have almost devoured the marlin's entire carcass, leaving a skeleton consisting mostly of its backbone, its tail and its head. Santiago knows that he is entirely unlucky now, and defeated now, but not when he caught the marlin, tells the sharks of how they have killed his dreams. Upon reaching the shore before dawn on the next day, Santiago struggles to his shack, carrying the heavy mast on his shoulder, leaving the fish head and the bones on the shore. Once 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. Pedrico is given the head of the fish, and the other fishermen tell Manolin to tell the old man how sorry they are. Tourists at the nearby café mistakenly take it for a shark. The boy, worried about the old man, cries upon finding him safe asleep and at his injured hands. Manolin 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.

## Literary significance and criticism

*The Old Man and the Sea* served to reinvigorate Hemingway's literary reputation and prompted a reexamination of his entire body of work. The novel was initially received with much popularity; it restored many readers' confidence in Hemingway's capability as an author. Its publisher, [Scribner's](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Scribner%27s_Sons), on an early dust jacket, called the novel a "new classic," and many critics favorably compared it with such works as [William Faulkner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Faulkner)'s *The Bear* and [Herman Melville](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herman_Melville)'s [*Moby-Dick*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moby-Dick).

Ernest Hemingway and Henry ("Mike") Strater with the remaining 500 lbs of an estimated 1000 lb [marlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marlin) that was half-eaten by sharks before it could be landed in the Bahamas in 1935. See [*Pilar*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pilar_%28boat%29) for details of this episode.

[Gregorio Fuentes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregorio_Fuentes), who many critics believe was an inspiration for Santiago, was a blue-eyed man born on [Lanzarote](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanzarote) in the [Canary Islands](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canary_Islands). After going to sea at age ten on ships that called in African ports, he migrated permanently to Cuba when he was 22. After 82 years in Cuba, Fuentes attempted to reclaim his Spanish citizenship in 2001.[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-El_pescador_que_inspir.C3.B3_a_Hemingway_.E2.80.98El_viejo_y_el_mar.E2.80.99_recupera_la_nacionalidad_espa.C3.B1ola-15) Critics have noted that Santiago was also at least 22 when he immigrated from Spain to Cuba, and thus old enough to be considered an immigrant—and a foreigner—in Cuba.[[15]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-16)

Hemingway at first planned to use Santiago's story, which became *The Old Man and the Sea*, as part of an intimacy between mother and son. Relationships in the book relate to the Bible, which he referred to as "The Sea Book". Some aspects of it did appear in the posthumously published [*Islands in the Stream*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islands_in_the_Stream_%28Hemingway%29). Hemingway mentions the real life experience of an old fisherman almost identical to that of Santiago and his marlin in *On the Blue Water: A Gulf Stream Letter* ([*Esquire*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esquire_%28magazine%29), April 1936).[[16]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-17)[[17]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-18)

Joseph Waldmeir's essay "*Confiteor Hominem*: Ernest Hemingway's Religion of Man" is a favorable critical reading of the novel—and one which has defined analytical considerations since. Perhaps the most memorable claim is Waldmeir's answer to the question—What is the book's message?

The answer assumes a third level on which *The Old Man and the Sea* must be read—as a sort of allegorical commentary on all his previous work, by means of which it may be established that the religious overtones of *The Old Man and the Sea* are not peculiar to that book among Hemingway's works, and that Hemingway has finally taken the decisive step in elevating what might be called his philosophy of Manhood to the level of a religion.[[18]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-waldmeir-19)

Waldmeir considered the function of the novel's Christian imagery, made most evident through Hemingway's obvious reference to the [crucifixion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion) of Christ following Santiago's sighting of the sharks that reads:

*′Ay,′* he said aloud. There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood.[[19]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-20)

One of the most outspoken critics of *The Old Man and the Sea* is Robert P. Weeks. His 1962 piece "Fakery in *The Old Man and the Sea*" presents his claim that the novel is a weak and unexpected divergence from the typical, realistic Hemingway (referring to the rest of Hemingway's body of work as "earlier glories").[[20]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-weeks-21) In juxtaposing this novel against Hemingway's previous works, Weeks contends:

The difference, however, in the effectiveness with which Hemingway employs this characteristic device in his best work and in *The Old Man and the Sea* is illuminating. The work of fiction in which Hemingway devoted the most attention to natural objects, *The Old Man and the Sea*, is pieced out with an extraordinary quantity of fakery, extraordinary because one would expect to find no inexactness, no romanticizing of natural objects in a writer who loathed [W.H. Hudson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W.H._Hudson), could not read [Thoreau](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_David_Thoreau), deplored Melville's rhetoric in *Moby Dick*, and who was himself criticized by other writers, notably Faulkner, for his devotion to the facts and his unwillingness to 'invent.'[[20]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea#cite_note-weeks-21)

Some critics suggest Hemingway wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* in reaction against the overtly negative criticism he received for [*Across the River and into the Trees*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Across_the_River_and_into_the_Trees).