

The Old Man and the Sea by Hemingway

1. Discuss religious symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea*. To what effect does Hemingway employ such images?

Ans:

The Old Man and the Sea is rich in meaning. Virtually every element operates on two levels, revealing a deeper symbolic meaning beneath its literal function. Nothing that happens in the novella is only what it seems. Instead the novella is an allegory, elevating the story of Santiago's epic struggle with the marlin to humankind's universal struggle for survival.

Christian symbolism, especially images that refer to the crucifixion of Christ, is present throughout *The Old Man and the Sea*. During the old man's battle with the marlin, his palms are cut by his fishing cable. Given Santiago's suffering and willingness to sacrifice his life, the wounds are suggestive of Christ's stigmata, and Hemingway goes on to portray the old man as a Christ-like martyr. As soon as the sharks arrive, Santiago makes a noise one would make "feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood." And the old man's struggle up the hill to his village with his mast across his shoulders is evocative of Christ's march toward Calvary. Even the position in which Santiago collapses on his bed—he lies face down with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up—brings to mind the image of Christ on the cross. Hemingway employs these images in order to link Santiago to Christ, who exemplified transcendence by turning loss into gain, defeat into triumph, and even death into life.

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Magnificent and glorious, the marlin symbolizes the ideal opponent. In a world in which “everything kills everything else in some way,” Santiago feels genuinely lucky to find himself matched against a creature that brings out the best in him: his strength, courage, love, and respect.

The Lions on the Beach

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

