

CLIFFS NOTES on

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HEMINGWAY'S

THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA



Cliffs
NOTES^{INC.}

YOUR KEY TO THE CLASSICS

A NOTE TO THE READER

These Notes present a clear discussion of the action and thought of the work under consideration and a concise interpretation of its artistic merits and its significance.

They are intended as a supplementary aid to the serious student. They serve to free the student from interminable and distracting note-taking in class so that he may listen intelligently to what the instructor is saying, or to the class discussion, making selective notes on these, secure in the knowledge that he has the basic understanding. They are also helpful in preparing for an examination, saving not merely the burden but the confusion of trying to re-read the full text under pressure, and disentangling from a mass of—often illegible—notes that which is of central importance.

THE NOTES ARE NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE TEXT ITSELF OR FOR THE CLASSROOM DISCUSSION OF THE TEXT, AND THE STUDENT WHO SO ATTEMPTS TO USE THEM IS DENYING HIMSELF THE VERY EDUCATION THAT HE IS PRESUMABLY GIVING HIS MOST VITAL YEARS TO ACHIEVE.

The critical evaluations have been prepared by experts with special knowledge of the individual texts who have usually had some years' experience in teaching the works. They are, however, not incontrovertible. No literary judgment is. Of any great work of literature there are many interpretations, and even conflicting views have value for the student (and the teacher), since the aim is not for the student to accept unquestioningly any one interpretation but to make his own.

The experience of millions of students over many years has shown that Notes such as these are a valuable educational tool and, properly used, can contribute materially to the great end of literature (to which, by the way, the teaching of literature is itself only a subsidiary)—that is, to the heightening of perception and awareness, the extending of sympathy, and the attainment of maturity by living, in Socrates' famous phrase, "the examined life."

THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

NOTES

including

Life and Background

General Introduction

List of Characters

Critical Commentaries

The Hemingway Code Hero

Themes in The Old Man and the Sea

Hemingway's Style

Character Analyses

Review Questions

Bibliography

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The Old Man and the Sea Notes

LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Ernest Hemingway's colorful life as a big game hunter, fisherman, and Nobel Prize winner began in quiet Oak Park, Illinois, July 21, 1899. Ernest was the second of six children born to Dr. and Mrs. Clarence E. Hemingway. His mother, a devout, religious woman with considerable musical talent, hoped that Ernest would develop an interest in music, but Ernest was a disappointment. He acquired his father's enthusiasms—a love of hunting and fishing in the north Michigan woods, and it is that phase of his childhood which formed important impressions and is reflected later in such Nick Adams stories as "Indian Camp" and "Big Two-Hearted River."

In high school Hemingway played football and also boxed and it was the latter which was responsible for a permanent eye injury that caused the army to reject his efforts to enlist in World War I. Boxing, however, finally proved to be an asset to Hemingway, for it gave him a lasting enthusiasm for prizefighting, material for stories, and a tendency to talk of his literary accomplishments in boxing terms.

Hemingway's writing career began early; he edited the high school newspaper and, after graduation, got a job as a reporter on the *Kansas City Star*, after he was turned down by the Kansas City draft boards. Hemingway's sights, however, were still set on Europe and he was at last successful in his attempts to serve the war effort: he joined a volunteer American Red Cross ambulance unit as a driver. Shortly thereafter, Hemingway was seriously wounded at Fossalta on the Italian Piave and he recalls that life slid from him, "like you'd pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by a corner," almost fluttered away, then returned. It is thought by some literary critics that it was this experience which gave Hemingway an obsession with his own fear and the need to test his courage throughout the rest of his life.

After a dozen operations on his knee and a recuperation in Milan, Hemingway returned, with an aluminum kneecap and two Italian decorations, to join the Italian infantry. These vivid experiences later provided background for *A Farewell to Arms*, the most famous of all the novels Hemingway wrote about war.

War—the cruelty and stoic endurance that it requires—forms a major part of Hemingway’s writing, beginning with the *In Our Time* collection of stories published in 1924 to his post-World War II novel, *Across the River and into the Trees*. In addition to World War I action, Hemingway covered the Greek-Turkish War in 1920 and, later, the Spanish Civil War in 1937.

Following World War I, Hemingway returned to northern Michigan to read, write, and fish, and then to work for the *Toronto Star* in Canada. He lived briefly in Chicago (where he came to know Sherwood Anderson) and in 1921 he married Hadley Richardson; the couple moved to Paris and Ernest worked as foreign correspondent for the *Toronto Star*. His newsbeat was all of Europe, and while still in his twenties he had interviewed Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Mussolini. These years—1921-26—are recorded in a posthumous collection of essays, *A Moveable Feast* (1964).

It was Sherwood Anderson who gave Hemingway a letter of introduction to Gertrude Stein, who was living in Paris, and it was that letter which gave Hemingway entrance into the world of working authors and artists who visited her home. It was Miss Stein, in fact, who mentioned a garage keeper’s comment, “You are all a lost generation”—a casual remark, yet one which became world-famous after Hemingway used it as an epigraph to his first major novel, *The Sun Also Rises*.

The term “lost generation” was instantly meaningful to Hemingway’s readers. It signified the attitudes of the postwar generation and especially those of the literary movement produced by the young writers of that time. These writers believed generally that their lives and hopes had been shattered by the war. They had been led down a glory trail to death not for noble,

patriotic ideals, but for the greedy, materialistic gain of power groups. The high-minded sentiments of their elders were not to be trusted; only reality was truth and that was harsh: life was futile and often it was nothing, meaningless.

The Hemingways were divorced in 1927, the same year that he married *Vogue* writer Pauline Pfeiffer. In 1928 the Hemingways moved to Key West, Florida. The shocking event of 1928 for Hemingway was the suicide of his father, who had been ill with hypertension and diabetes. It wasn't until 1940, however, that the idea of suicide was reflected in his writings—through the thoughts of Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. This novel, published in 1940, grew out of Hemingway's personal interest in the Spanish Civil War of the thirties.

While still a foreign correspondent in Paris, Hemingway had watched the Spanish political situation developing under the reign of Alfonso XII. He had visited Spain during the summer of 1931 after the overthrow of the monarchy and had predicted that civil war would erupt in 1935. When it came, in 1936, Hemingway began writing and making speeches to raise funds for the Loyalist cause; later, in 1937, he went to Spain to cover the war for the North American Newspaper Alliance. Many other young men from the United States and other countries joined the Spanish Loyalist forces in defense of democratic ideals, but the war was won by the dictator, Francisco Franco.

In 1940, Hemingway and Pauline were divorced and he married writer Martha Gelhorn; they toured China, then established a residence in Cuba. When World War II began, Hemingway volunteered his services and those of his fishing boat, the *Pilar*, and served with the U.S. Navy as a submarine spotter in the Caribbean. Then, in 1944, he found himself as a forty-five-year-old war correspondent barnstorming through Europe with the Allied invasion troops—and sometimes ahead of them. It is said that it was he who liberated the Ritz hotel in Paris and that when the Allied troops arrived, a guard was found posted at the entrance with a notice, "Papa took good hotel. Plenty stuff in the cellar."

Following his divorce in 1944, Hemingway married Mary Welsh, a *Time* magazine correspondent. They lived in Venice after the war, but finally returned to *Finca Vigia* (Lookout Farm) near Havana, Cuba. In 1950, *Across the River and into the Trees* appeared, but it was not a critical success. One of the reported comments was that Hemingway was finished. His 1952 work, *The Old Man and the Sea*, restored Hemingway's stature and he was awarded the 1953 Pulitzer Prize.

In January of 1954, Hemingway was off for one of his many African hunts and was reported dead after two airplane crashes in two days. He survived, despite severe internal and spinal injuries and a concussion, and read the numerous newspaper obituary notices, noting with great pleasure that they were favorable. That same year Hemingway received the Swedish Academy's Nobel Prize for Literature, "for his powerful style-forming mastery of the art of modern narration, as most recently evidenced in *The Old Man and the Sea*."

A few years later, Hemingway was sixty and there was his birthday photograph in a national magazine. White-bearded and still full of vigor, Hemingway was booting an empty beer can high in the air along a road near his Ketchum, Idaho, home. But he was not happy and during 1961, he was periodically plagued by high blood pressure and mental depression. He received shock treatments during two long confinements at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, but they seemed to be of little value. He died July 2, 1961, at his home, the result of self-inflicted gunshot wounds.

Looking back, one senses that there were always two Hemingways. One was the adventurer—the grinning, bearded "Papa" of the news photographs; the other was the Hemingway who was the skillful, sensitive author—he who patiently wrote, rewrote, and edited his work. In discussing *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway is said to have read through the manuscript some two hundred times before releasing it. Hemingway, the colorful legend, was also the author who said, "What many another writer would be content to leave in massive proportions, I polish into a tiny gem."

INTRODUCTION

The Old Man and the Sea is very similar to Hemingway's "On the Blue Water," a story published in *Esquire* in April, 1936. Like *The Old Man*, the short story concerns an old fisherman who battles a giant marlin for three days and nights. Hemingway had heard from a longtime friend about such an incident actually happening and ever since he had published the first version, he had considered the possibility of expanding the tale. In January, 1939, Hemingway began seriously planning revisions, telling this time what the old man thought during those days and nights. He hoped to include it in a volume containing already published war stories, plus two other new stories. Hemingway was very optimistic about the success of the volume and especially about the story of the fisherman. He was anxious to return to Cuba to absorb atmosphere and sail out in a skiff to check details.

He did return to Cuba a few weeks later but he did not work on the story of the fisherman; instead, he began work on a new novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

It was not until after Christmas, 1951, that Hemingway began anew on his story of the old Cuban fisherman. It was virtually finished by mid-February and the entire text appeared in the fall in a single issue of *Life* magazine. The magazine sold over five million copies within forty-eight hours. The book itself had advance sales of 50,000 copies and was immediately proclaimed a masterpiece. Malcolm Cowley wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* that the novel was "as nearly faultless as any short novel of our times." Hemingway's writing, he said, had the quality of being familiar and yet perpetually new—the essence of classical prose; and critic Edward Weeks, in the *Atlantic*, cited the story's "clean thrusting power." Hemingway, speaking about his writing, said (reminiscent of the old fisherman) that "a writer is driven far out past where he can go, out to where no one can help him." This Hemingway did, as Robert Davis in a

New York Times review noted: Hemingway, he said, had the “strength and craft and courage to go far out, and perhaps even far down, for the truly big ones.”

The *Old Man of American Letters* was not “finished,” as the critics had once said; he had triumphed over them all, producing a classic worthy of the Nobel Prize which he was awarded in 1954.

The Old Man and the Sea is a small volume, but it is full of challenging thoughts for even the casual reader. This is a powerful story of a lonely, wise old fisherman who conquers a magnificent fish, endures the heart-breaking loss of it, and rises gallantly above his defeat. He is a hero in deed and spirit, a defeated but valiant man who has the courage to try again. Furthermore, this is the touching story of companionship—the deep love and respect that a young boy and an old man hold for each other.

The more sophisticated reader, familiar with Hemingway’s life and attitudes, catches glimpses of Hemingway as he may have thought of himself in his later years when he was widely called “Papa” and his image was that of a mellowed adventurer, but one still filled with heart and fire. Santiago, the old fisherman, though old, still dares to try, persists in doing the very best he can—and succeeds only to lose. He loses the battle with the sharks and his prize fish, but he wins a victory for himself because he knows that he fought well and that he has the courage to try again.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Santiago

An old Cuban fisherman.

Manolin

A young boy; Santiago’s closest friend.

Martin

Owner of the Terrace; he gives Manolin food for the old man.

Pedrico

He receives the head of the marlin to use in his fish traps.

Rogelio

A young boy who once helped Santiago with his fish nets.

The Marlin

An eighteen-foot catch; the largest fish ever caught in the Gulf.

Los Galanos

Scavenger sharks who destroy the marlin.

The Mako Shark

Sleek killer of the sea; known for his eight raking rows of teeth.

CRITICAL COMMENTARIES

ABOUT THE OLD MAN AND THE BOY*

The novel's opening sentence is terse and direct: the main character is described and the situation is stated. Yet Hemingway

*The novel, of course, has no chapter divisions, but for the sake of discussion and easy reference, appropriate titles have been given to the various scenes.

does not even give us the name of the old man whom he is writing about. He tells us simply that the man is old, that he fishes for a living, but that for eighty-four days he has caught no fish. This is a long time for a fisherman to catch no fish; it is almost three months. Our first impression, then, of the main character of this novel is that he is a failure. In fact, we soon learn that most of the men of the village do not regard him even as a man. They believe in a code which is based on fate; and fate, it seems, has denied fish to the old man because he is too old now to be either a real fisherman or a real man. He is useless and, more important, he is unlucky. For this reason, he is somewhat of an outcast in the village.

The old man's only strong link with the village is a young boy. Hemingway pairs up youth and old age—these two contrasting extremes, these poles of a man's life. The boy is important to the old man because he believes in the old man; moreover, the old man believes in himself—despite fate—and despite the opinions of the other men. To most of the other fishermen, the old man is *salao*, which is Portuguese slang for “very unlucky” or “cursed with bad luck.” Interestingly, since the boy, Manolin, was reluctantly transferred to another boat, *he* has caught fish. Still, however, he and the old man are joined—by friendship and faith.

What is it that the old man and the boy have faith in? The answer to this question contains one of the major ideas of this novel. The old fisherman and the boy value human relationships above materialism. The boy's father and many of the other fishermen put material considerations first: a man must catch fish—otherwise he has no money; otherwise he is not a man. Manolin wants to accompany the old man again because he has done what his parents wanted him to do: he has “made some money.” Now he wants to return to follow old Santiago. The relationship, as many critics have suggested, is very much like that between Christ and one of his disciples. Yet Hemingway is even clearer than his symbol-oriented critics: “The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him.” Note Hemingway's straightforward explanation. He offers us no ambiguous or

mystical embellishment of the relationship between the two fishermen; he states a simple fact, plainly, in terms we immediately understand.

Manolin's love for Santiago is spontaneous and natural. In a village of simple fishermen, Santiago is an oddity. Many a young boy might avoid a very old fisherman, especially one whom the village considered tainted with bad luck. Not Manolin. He is sensitive enough to realize that the old man may be different but that he is wiser and more humane than most of the other men. Santiago talks to Manolin as though Manolin were an adult; he does not patronize the boy. He readily teaches him all the "tricks" he has learned about fishing. Most of all, he offers Manolin a philosophy about fishing and about living. The two fishermen talk to each other easily; there is a sense of deep, personal understanding between them. Yet the relationship is unusual; a man is expected to have male friends his own age. Santiago does not; his closest friend is a boy. Youth and old age do not usually understand one another so well, much less respect and trust one another. The difference in this case is that the boy does not act like a boy. Nowhere do we see him being boyish, carefree, and irresponsible. Manolin's concern for Santiago is that of one human being for another human being. Ironically, he is more of a man—in the humanistic sense—than his father is. Despite this fact, however, both Santiago and the boy are viewed by the men of the village as not really men—the old man because he is old and catches no fish; the boy, because of his age. The situation is one of dramatic irony. To the community, Santiago and Manolin are not men; to us, they are.

Santiago and Manolin are men because of their codes of honor. Each of them is an idealist, for whom fishing is more than an occupation. For them, fishing is not merely a way of making money: it is a way of life. They are conscious of the moods of the weather; they are sensitive to sunrises, the far hills, the contest between man and fish, and between man and the sea. Their philosophy, or code, is based not on competition with one another, but on love, loyalty, and respect.

Within Santiago's code, what passes for failure in the world is, in fact, a kind of victory. He is *not* defeated by what other men would be defeated by. The usual definition of "defeat" is not a part of the code of the old man and the boy. Hemingway tells us, for example, that the sail of the old man's boat looked like "the flag of permanent defeat." This parallels what the village thinks about the old man. But what Hemingway is aiming for is an investigation of what really constitutes defeat and failure. Failure, to a strong man, is not failure merely because a man is so labeled by other men; defeat is not defined by catching no fish for eighty-four days. Defeat is relative; it is defined within one's personal code of values — not by the community.

When we begin to investigate Santiago's code of values, perhaps it is best to start with the old man's name. "Santiago" is derived from San Diego, or Saint James, the patron saint of Spain, a man who was a fisherman and who was defiantly independent. Note also how Hemingway has created Santiago for us: he is thin, gaunt even; he has deep wrinkles, discolored blotches, and deep-creased scars. Hemingway is emphasizing Santiago's age to show us that he is indeed old and worn; to all appearances, he *seems* to be a man ready to be written off as a has-been. He is old and, too often, societies dismiss the old as useless. (This, indeed, happened in Hemingway's own situation; the critics, prior to the publication of this novel, unanimously agreed that he was "finished.") Santiago bears scars and the scars are not fresh. But Hemingway does not consider Santiago's scars as disfigurements. Scars are marks of honor, emblems of triumph. The scars, Hemingway says, are as "old as erosions in a fishless desert." Here one should note the unusual conjunction of "fishless" and "desert," a description which intensifies the idea of Santiago's failure as a fisherman. The old man's physical features have been worn away like the land, and this emphasizes the idea of Santiago's age and also of his character. Like the land, he is old but he survives, despite the erosion. His eyes are perhaps the key to his soul; they are blue, like the sea, and "undefeated." In spite of misfortune, the old man retains the will to continue and the courage to try and transcend what is believed to be impossible.

PREPARATIONS

While Santiago and Manolin are sitting together at the Terrace, Hemingway moves his perspective; he shows us more thoroughly what some of the other fishermen think of Santiago. Many make fun of him; they think that Santiago is a silly old man because he will not admit defeat and will not admit that he is a failure. (We are reminded of the old knight Don Quixote; he too was mocked for his ideals and for his belief in himself.) Those few men (old fishermen) who do not make fun of Santiago feel pity toward him, but they disguise their feelings in small talk about the currents, how deep they dropped their lines, what they saw while fishing, and so forth.

This small talk about fishing, however, besides showing us how a few of the fishermen treat Santiago, serves another purpose. Hemingway uses this scene (and that of the butchered marlin from the successful catches) in order to achieve verisimilitude, a sense of truth. Hemingway himself fished many times for marlin, he saw sharks hoisted on a block and tackle, and he savored the fishy tang of the livers being cut out. As readers, we respond to these simple and vivid, realistic details. In a way, this is almost photographic realism as Hemingway shows us the world of Santiago's fishing village and, at the same time, what a man must do if he is to be considered successful and manly.

Returning to the old man and the boy, one of the first things we notice is that their conversation is rather sparse. Neither of them feels a desperate need to talk. Santiago is not driven to recall wistfully, monologue-like, "the good old days" when he caught many fish; Manolin does not ramble on about inconsequential matters. True, they do talk of the past, but what they discuss concerns *both* of them. They talk of Manolin's early days of fishing with Santiago. This is not empty nostalgia. They are recalling their heritage of fishing—in a sense, strengthening their devotion to one another and, more important, strengthening our belief in them. Here is proof of how "the old man had taught the boy to fish" and why "the boy loved him." Manolin's