

The Old Man and the Sea Study Guide

by Calvin Roso

For the novel by
Ernest Hemingway



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Synopsis

*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;
persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. . . .
Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away,
yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*

—2 Corinthians 4:8,9,16

After 84 days without taking a fish, Santiago is soon to catch something larger than he can ever imagine. It is his courage and perseverance of character that enables him to go out to sea in his weather-beaten boat each day.

In the midst of ridicule from younger fishermen, Santiago finds courage in his friendship with a young boy, Manolin, who has fished with Santiago since he was five years old. But because of Santiago's "bad luck," Manolin's parents will not allow the boy to fish with Santiago any more.

This short novel shows the outcome of one man's endurance in the midst of defeat, and how the friendship of a young boy gives him hope. *The Old Man and the Sea* won author Ernest Hemingway the Pulitzer Prize in 1953.

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3. He could see the prisms in the deep dark water and the line stretching ahead and the strange undulation of the calm.

4. His sword was as long as a baseball bat and tapered like a rapier and he rose full length from the water and re-entered it . . .

5. “. . . I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre if I catch him.”

Stream of Consciousness:

1. *Stream of consciousness* is the technique of presenting a narrative as the continuous flow of a character’s thoughts and responses. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, once Santiago is alone on the sea, his inner thoughts and spoken dialogue are presented in stream of consciousness as each idea suggests another.

For example, consider the paragraph beginning “This is the second day now that I do not know the result of the *juegos*, he thought.” In that one paragraph, Santiago’s thoughts move from baseball scores, to DiMaggio, to bone spurs, to fighting cocks, to endurance, and finally to wishing he was the marlin.

Find another passage that demonstrates this style.

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10. Hemingway uses birds to parallel and symbolize different aspects of Santiago's experience. For example, early in his journey out Santiago notices the small birds who "were always flying and looking and almost never finding." This parallels Santiago's experience on the previous 84 days. Then, just prior to Santiago's success in finding and catching the marlin, a man-of-war bird is seen catching fish.

On Santiago's second day at sea, a tired warbler rests on Santiago's stern. What might the appearance of this bird say about Santiago at this point in the story?

11. Santiago wonders if the warbler is a young warbler who has never crossed the gulf before, and he understands that the warbler will "learn about the hawks soon enough."

"Take a good rest, small bird," he said. "Then go in and take your chance like any man or bird or fish."

What general statement does Santiago seem to be making about the process of growing older?

12. Read again the description of the marlin as it leaps from the water. Hemingway does not give specific measurements of the fish (except to say that it is two feet longer than Santiago's boat), but he lets the reader understand the immensity of the fish through the use of descriptive language. Write down the descriptive words or phrases that are used to communicate the size of the fish.

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Dig Deeper:

17. At the beginning of his struggle against the marlin, Santiago makes little acknowledgment of or reference to God. Now, as his second day begins, Santiago says “God let him [the marlin] jump.” Later he says “God help me to have the cramp go.” Finally he makes promises to God. What does he promise to do if he catches the fish?

18. On the second day at sea, Santiago makes a vow to God. Read Numbers 30:1, 2; Deuteronomy 23:21–23; Ecclesiastes 5:4–6; Matthew 5:33–37; and James 5:12. What do these verses say about making vows to God and making vows in general? What difference do you see between the Old Testament verses and the New Testament verses? Why do you think they differ?

19. Though we have not seen Santiago pray or talk to God before, suddenly we see him talking to God and saying prayers a number of times. Why do you think this is? Read Philippians 4:6, 7; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18. How do these verses say we should pray? Is Santiago doing this? Give an example of how you could do this in your daily routine.

Answer Key

Note: Most of the questions in Progeny Press study guides deal with students' understanding and interpretation of issues in the novel; therefore, most answers will be individual to the student. Progeny Press answer keys are designed to be as inclusive as possible for the teacher and/or parent, giving enough background and information to judge whether the student has grasped the essence of the issue and the question. We try to point out some directions students' answers might take, which directions might be best, and some errors that may appear. Students are not expected to answer as completely as the answers provided in the Answer Key.

Exposition

Vocabulary:

1. wrapped or rolled; 2. thin and angular; 3. kind or generous; 4. land worn away by water, wind, or ice; 5. will or determination

Characterization:

1. Santiago: We are told that he is old, he fishes alone, and that he has not caught a fish for 84 days. We are told that he is considered "salao, which is the worst form of unlucky." As if to reinforce this, the author ends the paragraph by saying that the old man's sail looks like "the flag of permanent defeat."

Manolin: We know right away that the boy cares for the old man. He had fished with Santiago until his parents had ordered him to go in another boat. He feels sad when he sees the old man come in each day with no fish. Even though he is not fishing with Santiago, he helps Santiago carry all of his gear.

2. The second paragraph emphasizes Santiago's age. The third paragraph contrasts this by telling us that everything about Santiago is old "except his eyes." The effect is heightened by the use of contrasting descriptions. In the second paragraph, Santiago's scars are described as being "as old as erosions in a fishless desert." But his eyes are described as being "the same color as the sea, . . . cheerful and undefeated." The contrast between these descriptions—one dry and fishless, the other being the sea (and presumably full of fish)—shows the sharp contrast between Santiago's outward appearance and something within him which remains young.

3. Santiago's home is just a shack. The mast of his skiff is nearly as long as the one room of the shack. Inside there is just a bed, a table, a chair, and a place on the dirt floor for cooking. The sparseness of the shack suggests that Santiago may spend most of his time fishing on the sea. It also speaks of Santiago's poverty, but may also hint at a simplicity of spirit—a man who does not desire many things. There is no food (and we know that Santiago has not caught any fish) so Santiago must be supported by others, specifically the boy and the man who gives the boy food and beer. We learn that Santiago was married, but that he will not display the picture of his wife because it makes him feel lonely. The two pictures that he does display suggests that Santiago is (or at least his wife was) Catholic.

Questions:

1. The initial conflict or problem introduced in the exposition is that Santiago has not caught a fish for 84 days.

2. The boy's parents told him he couldn't fish with Santiago any longer because Santiago had gone to sea 40 days without catching a fish. This was "salao, which is the worst form of unlucky."