The Old Man and the Sea

By: Ernest Hemingway
Exposition Elements

- Setting (time and place)
  - A Cuban village near Havana
  - Mostly set on the sea in the Gulf Stream

- Characters
  - Santiago—Old Cuban fisherman
  - Manolin—The boy who is Santiago’s friend
  - The giant marlin (symbolic)
  - The sharks (symbolic)
  - The sea (symbolic)
  - Joe DiMaggio (symbolic)
The Old Man in the Sea is an **Allegory** too!

- Santiago’s struggle is an extended metaphor for the **human condition**---how we all struggle and take risks in a sea of unknowns.

- Through Santiago’s struggle, Hemingway attempts to demonstrate what man can endure showing the nobility of the human endeavor in the face of extreme odds.

- Reminding us of Faulkner’s speech that man “will not only endure, but he will prevail.”
Symbolism: The novel is rich in symbolism that enhances both the plot and the themes.

- Most of these symbols have **multiple layers of meaning**.
- The Sea
- The Marlin
- The Sharks
- Santiago’s Dreams about Lions
- Santiago
- Joe DiMaggio
- Religious Symbolism
Symbolism---the sea

The major symbol is the sea, which stands for all of life on which humankind must sail. In both the sea and in life, there are a number of possibilities that lie hidden from the common eye; some are gifts to be treasured and some are problems to be defeated.

Theme: It is the struggle that is all-important, and an individual obtains the status of hero if he/she battles the sea (life) with “grace under pressure.”
In the novel, Santiago embarks on a sea journey *(life)* and encounters a giant marlin *(treasure)*. He battles nobly to earn the treasure and then fights the sharks *(problems)* to save it. The struggle defines him as a hero. Even though he loses the treasure *(the marlin)* to the sharks *(the problems)*, he has won the sea battle *(life)*. **He is destroyed, but not defeated.**
The Marlin--many meanings

1) In the beginning, the giant marlin becomes a symbol of the mysterious world of the unknown that challenges everyone.

2) The marlin can also be seen as one of life’s treasures to be found and fought for---something to strive for (family, education, accomplishment).

3) The fish is also a symbol of Christianity, and Hemingway imbues the giant fish with several Christian virtues: kindness, patience, and determination. The fish is also described as being a source of food for others, a sacrifice so that others may live.

4) The Marlin is also a symbol for Hemingway’s greatest works---his novels---that he tirelessly suffers over.
The Sharks—Evil in the world

- The sharks themselves are portrayed as malevolent creatures and symbolize the deadly forces of evil that reign in nature and life.
- The sharks seize the old man’s prize from him and leave him shattered and shamed, just like sin can do in the world.
- The sharks also represent the critics who have been tearing Hemingway’s work (writing) to shreds.
There is an unmistakable autobiographical element in the novel. At the time of its writing, Hemingway was himself an older man, challenged by the struggles of age, much like Santiago. Prior to the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea*, he had been having difficulty with his writing. Between 1940 and 1950, he published no novels. When he finally published "Across the River and into the Trees" in 1950, Hemingway was criticized severely for falling below his usual standards. It was obvious he was in a "literary drought," much like Santiago’s own round of bad luck in fishing. When he published *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1952, it was his prize, his giant fish. It was also a fitting reply to his critics, who eagerly tore his writing apart; the critics are obviously symbolized by the sharks in the novel.
Santiago--the main character

- Santiago serves as a metaphor for the creative artist, someone like Hemingway himself. He is capable in his profession, has proved his talent several times before, but that is not sufficient. He has to prove it every day, for every day is a new day. Santiago’s suffering is akin to artistic creation, which is never an easy task. Even if and when a masterpiece is achieved, there is no guarantee that critics, who are no less than the killer sharks, will not tear it to pieces.
Christ-like imagery--symbolic
Christ figure---Santiago

- Santiago endures 3 days on the sea
- The struggle with the marlin reflects Christ’s struggle on the cross
- Santiago bears the weight of the fish on his back (Christ carrying the cross)
- The wounds to his hands
- Biblical allusions abound
Christ-like imagery cont.

- When the sharks attack, Santiago utters a sound “as a man might make involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hand into the wood”
- He is humble, long-suffering, courageous, he experiences failure, but is still not defeated.
The numeric symbolism in the novel also seems to be religious. Three, seven, and forty are numbers that have special significance in the Bible. As the story opens, the old man has unsuccessfully fished with the boy for forty days, followed by another forty-four days alone. His ordeal with the great fish lasts for three days, and there are three distinct stages in the struggle. Santiago finally manages to kill the fish on its seventh turn. Then he must battle seven sharks. His struggle with them is also divided into three sections.
Symbol of the Lions--strength, nobility of purpose, and inspiration.

- When the lions appear in their adult majesty, they suggest and signify great strength and nobility and provide Santiago with inspiration, a nobility of purpose, and a sense of vitality that goads him toward fulfilling his ambition.
Joe DiMaggio--the determination to win against all odds

DiMaggio, the partially handicapped baseball player, who often figures in the old man’s waking thoughts, as well as in his dreams. DiMaggio inspires him with leadership qualities and the determination to win, in spite of handicaps. When his left hand cramps and he feels drained of his strength, the old man reminds himself of the painful bone spur that handicaps the great DiMaggio. The image of the baseball hero playing in pain gives Santiago renewed vigor and stamina to bear his own pain.
Hemingway’s Code Hero

- A hero must be courageous but must avoid death at all costs.
- A hero does not have self-pity, but he does have self discipline and control.
- A hero realizes death is in all things, therefore, he tries to live life fully.
- A hero is a person of action.
- A hero practices humility—doesn’t discuss his achievements.
- A hero faces his greatest trial alone and tests himself to his limit.
- A hero exhibits “grace under pressure.”
Theme

- All of the symbols employed by Hemingway add to the basic theme that life is an endless struggle with illusory rewards. In order to gain nobility in life, a person must show bravery, confidence, courage, patience, optimism, and intelligence during the struggle. Then, even if the prize is lost, the person has won the battle, proving himself capable of retaining grace under pressure, the ultimate test of mankind.
Theme Summarized

- It’s not in the winning or losing (in life) that matters, it is how you play the game.

- Hemingway’s comment or opinion about “life” is that to be heroic, you must overcome life’s obstacles with dignity, decency, and courage so that even if you are destroyed, you are not defeated.