

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Old Man and the Sea

by

Ernest Hemingway

Book Information

Ernest Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea

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127 Pages

Book Level: 5.1

Interest Level: UG

In this beautiful, symbolic story an old fisherman catches a giant marlin, only to have sharks strip it to the bone.

Topics: Adventure, Trials/Tribulations; Classics, Classics (All); English in a Flash Recommended List, Library 3, Chapter 4, 90%; Natural Environments, Oceans; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Sports/Recreation, Fishing

Main Characters

Manolin a young fisherman who used to fish with Santiago and cares for him

Santiago an old fisherman who is the protagonist of the story

sharks the creatures who destroy the marlin

the enormous marlin the big fish Santiago knew he could catch

Vocabulary

bight the middle part of a rope; a loop, or double part, of a rope

bitt a fixed, vertical timber or metal casting, usually one of a pair, for securing hawsers, cables, and other lines

dentuso the first kind of shark that attacks the big fish

gaff a barbed spear or iron hook for securing heavy fish, as in lifting them into a boat

galano shovel-nosed shark

grippe an acute catarrhal disease identical with, or like, influenza

phosphorescence to gleam, especially in the dark

salao "the worst form of unlucky"

skiff a boat with centerboard and spritsail, light enough to be rowed

Synopsis

As the story opens, Santiago, an old fisherman, is talking with Manolin, a young fisherman who fished with him until recently. Santiago has not taken a fish for eighty-four days and the boy's parents think the old man is unlucky and have sent the boy to work with another fisherman. The boy brings the old man food, and talks with him about baseball and where the old man plans to fish the next day.

Before dawn the next day, the old man begins to row far out, hoping to catch something. He hooks a very big fish that pulls the boat without ceasing. The old man puts the line over his shoulders and holds it with his hands. He uses his body to cushion the strain of the line. If he hooks the line to the boat, the fish might suddenly pull harder and break the line. The fish pulls the boat for almost three days before he grows tired and begins to circle at the surface. During this time the old man has gone from feeling pity for the fish to feeling the fish is his brother. He and the fish are linked together. He kills the fish, but it is too large to pull into his boat, so he ties it to the side and begins to sail back toward land. On the way there, the fish is attacked by sharks. The old man does his best to fight them off, but in the end the fish is completely eaten.

When the local fishermen see the remains of the fish they are awed by its size. The boy is grief-stricken. He takes care of the old man as best he can, and says he will fish with the old man from now on, despite what his parents say. The book ends with the old man sleeping and dreaming about the lions he had seen in Africa in his youth.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

A series of events lead up to the old man returning with only the skeleton of a fish. What are they?

A series of sharks eat the fish. The old man kills the first one with a harpoon, but it snaps the harpoon rope and sinks with the harpoon. The second attack involves two sharks and the old man kills them with his knife lashed to the butt of one of the oars. The old man kills the next shark with the knife, but the blade snaps. He drives off the next sharks with a club. Still more sharks come in a pack and he loses the club. He uses the tiller after that, but by then the sharks have eaten the fish.

Literary Analysis

The old man's holding the fishing line across his shoulders could easily be a symbol of life, the old man's or anyone's. Explain how this is so.

The line is a burden the old man would like to drop, but cannot. Instead he must use his back to cushion the pull of the line and be ready to give line with both hands. Similarly, the old man might want to die, but he cannot give up. He holds the care of the world on his shoulders and uses his hands to deal with day-to-day occurrences.

Inferential Comprehension

When the old man thinks about how no man is ever alone on the sea, what is he really thinking about?

There may be no other humans around, but he is still connected to all other living things, and even to the sky and the water.

Constructing Meaning

The narrator tells us (page 96) that after the big fish is dead its "eye looked as detached ... as a saint in a procession." How do you interpret this?

Accept any reasonable explanation or interpretation.

us which direction the fish pulled the boat. Have the students make a map of where they think the village might be, and where the fish pulled the boat.

Understanding the Author's Craft The book has lots of references to Christ and sins. For instance, there is a discussion of sin on page 105. Have the students find other references. They can describe how these references make them feel about the fisherman and the story. Have them change the references. How does this change the story?

Understanding Sequence Have the students write an outline of a sequel to this book. Would the boy be allowed to fish with the old man? Would the old man continue to be unlucky, or would he catch another fish? How would the boy help him?

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning The old man has a series of feelings about the fish. In the end he personifies the fish as a brother. Have the students trace his feelings about the fish from pity through his feeling that the fish is noble, to feeling the fish is his brother. Do the old man's feelings about the fish reflect his feelings about himself?

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The old man lives in a fishing village near Havana, Cuba. The book tells