

Discussion Questions, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway

1. "The Old Man and The Sea" seems like a deceptively simple story of a man's struggle with the creatures of the sea, but there are some symbols and messages that we can gather from the story. Hemingway claimed that there was no symbolism in the story, just "what happens," but we, as readers, don't believe that and see underlying messages. What is your initial response to reading the book? Did you like it or dislike it, and why? How would you describe the book to others?
2. How would describe Santiago's relationship to the sea and his love for deep sea fishing? Does he seem fearless in his desire to fish big fish in his little boat on the dangerous sea? What are the symbols of manhood and human endurance that you gather from the story? How would you explain Santiago's idea of bravery, strength, endurance, self-control, masculinity, heroism, and courage? Is there any sexism implied by this story?
3. Out of the many religious messages/religious symbols that you have read in the book, which stand out the most to you: Santiago's mercy, faith, pride, brotherhood, or sin? Santiago seems conflicted about the fish feeling both mercy and the desire to kill the creature. How would you explain his compassion and his desire to use the fish to feed a flock of people? Do you believe that such creatures should be killed for food or conserved, and protected from endangerment? Is Santiago really a "Christ like" figure?
4. The dreams of the lions playing on the coast of Africa that Santiago has when he remembers his turtling days seem important to him. One hundred years ago, there used to be 200,000 lions in Africa, and now there are only 20 to 40 thousand left in the wild. The Hemingway family has worked in Wildlife Conservation to prevent these animals from being hunted into extinction. The marlin is nearing the endangered list of animals that should be conserved. After reading "The Old Man and The Sea" would agree that these animals should be conserved? Marlin is still eaten in Japan and Cuba. Should it be taken off the menu? Do you think that Hemingway might have suggested that the endangered creatures of the world would one day have to be conserved?
5. The boy, or Manolin, seems to have a saintly devotion to the Old Man, Santiago, because Santiago taught him how to fish. The poor senior citizen doesn't have much in the world, but he seems to be portrayed as a "working class Saint" in this book. Do you see Santiago as a mythic character or saint? Can you find any other story of myth to compare to this story (perhaps the impossible river voyage of "Huckleberry Finn," the bloodlust of "Moby Dick," or the trials on the sea of "Odysseus?") How would explain the symbolism behind the marlins, the shark, and the other creatures of the sea? Is there heroic myth behind it, or brutal realism of man against the cruelty of the food chain, if you consider the food chain cruel?
6. Joe DiMaggio, who has won 9 World Series Championships in baseball by the year he retired in 1951, is a strong symbol for Santiago. How does Santiago use DiMaggio's

success as a baseball player as a message for deep sea fishing? Is Santiago idolizing and mythologizing DiMaggio? How does he compare DiMaggio's "bone spur" to his own hand cramping? Is this a human flaw of a great hero?

7. Hemingway won the Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize of Literature for "The Old Man and the Sea," and it has sold millions of copies since then. One critic online says the book is not seen as one of Hemingway's greatest books [today](#), because of "embarrassing narcissism, psychologically over simplification, and excessive sentimentality" ([gradesaver.com](#)). Would you agree or disagree and describe the novel this way? Explain the main responses that the book left you with.

8. Is there any symbolism in the sharks that take the fish away from the old man? Do you believe in the superstition that Santiago is "unlucky?" Should we as a society intervene and care of senior citizens, and help them through their private struggles?