

GCSE English Literature for OCR  
resource sheets

# The Old Man and the Sea

## Ernest Hemingway

Activities by Chris Barcock

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The following pages consist of teacher's notes and classroom support sheets for *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. These resources are to help students who are studying *The Old Man and the Sea* as part of the OCR GCSE English and English Literature specifications. These pages can be freely downloaded and printed out as required. This material may be freely copied for institutional use. However, this material is copyright and under no circumstances can copies be offered for sale. The publishers gratefully acknowledge permission to reproduce copyright material.

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# Introduction

## *The Old Man and the Sea* and the OCR Specifications for English & English Literature

*The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway is available for study in OCR's specifications for both English and English Literature, at both Higher and Foundation Tiers, from June 2005 onwards.

In Specification 1900, English, Unit 2432 is entitled 'Different Cultures, Analysis and Argument.' The latter parts of this triplet refer to the writing tasks in Section B. 'Different Cultures' denotes the theme of Section A, where *The Old Man and the Sea* is one of three texts (the others are OCR's *Opening Worlds* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*). The time available for the paper is 1 hour 45 minutes, so candidates should spend no more than 35 minutes on this question.

In Specification 1901, English Literature, *The Old Man and the Sea* is available for examination, again at both Higher and Foundation Tier, in both Scheme A and Scheme B. In Scheme A Unit 2442, Poetry and Prose post 1914, the time available for the paper is 1 hour 30 minutes, so candidates should spend no more than 45 minutes on this question. In Scheme B Unit 2448, the examined alternative to coursework, the time available for the paper is 1 hour 35 minutes and candidates should spend no more than 30 minutes on this question. Alternatively, in Scheme B, work on the novel may be submitted as coursework, as appropriate to the specification requirements.

All examinations are 'open book'. Candidates may take a copy of the text they have studied into the examination room which **must not** be annotated.

## Aim and content

The aim of these resources is to provide material that offers a way into the novel for GCSE students and helps to develop their understanding. The resources include a summary of the novel and materials aimed at developing central issues touched on in the summary.

There are several suggested activities ranging from written tasks to speaking and listening ones. Page references in these resources refer to the Heinemann New Windmills edition of *The Old Man and the Sea*, as prescribed in the OCR GCSE English specification, ISBN: 0435 122169.

# Ernest Hemingway

## His Early Years

Hemingway was born on July 21st 1899 in Oak Park, Illinois. After High School he moved to Kansas City, Missouri where he worked as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. He failed to qualify for the US Army in WW1 because of poor eyesight. He therefore enlisted with the US Red Cross to drive ambulances in Italy. He was seriously wounded on the Austrian Front in 1918. He later returned home and became a freelance writer for the *Toronto Star*.

In December 1921 he sailed to France and joined an expatriate community of writers and artists in Paris while continuing to write for the *Star*. He started writing short stories collected as “In Our Time.”

## A Hugely Successful Writer and Literary Celebrity

The novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) saw his reputation as a leading writer established.

Hemingway was greatly affected by the Spanish Civil War which gave him a cause in which he felt he could believe. His hatred of fascism gave new impetus and energy to his creative energies and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was, and still is, seen by many as the zenith of his literary career.

Meanwhile Hemingway sought and achieved a degree of notoriety as a literary and social celebrity. He was four times married and pursued blood sports with relish: he was an expert big game hunter, trout and deep sea fisherman and an expert on bull fighting. He continued to travel widely throughout his life in Europe, Africa and Cuba.

## The “old man” is born

Following the critical savaging of his WW2 novel *Across the River and into the Trees* in 1950, Hemingway was determined to make a point to his detractors and wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* a work that had been gestating in his imagination since he had first written about the Cuban culture for *Esquire* the 1930s. *The Old Man and the Sea* originally published as a single issue of ‘Life’ magazine won the Pulitzer Prize and led to Hemingway’s receipt of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954.

The last years of his life were spent in considerable pain and alcoholism: Hemingway committed suicide on July 2nd 1961.

## A Different Cultures Text

### Hemingway and Cuba

In the 1930s, and for a good deal of the Second World War, Hemingway had lived in Cuba and involved himself in attempting to hunt down German shipping taking on a vigilante style role in the waters of the Caribbean. Besides finding yet another theatre for his personal appetite for danger, adventure and glory, Hemingway's hatred of fascism was expressed in a concern for US security in the region.

American relations with Cuba remained warm after WW2 (see 'The Godfather' for the definitive fictional account of what those relations amounted to) and many Americans had profited from ownership of businesses stemming from the Platt Amendment of 1934, which effectively ended the US government's right to intervene in Cuban affairs. In 1952 President Prío Socarras was overthrown in a Military Coup by General Fulgencio Batista y Zalvidar, a man more than ever given to acceding to US influence. Batista had ruled as a Dictator previously and would continue to do so until his own overthrow by Fidel Castro in 1959.

### Contrasting Cultures

For Hemingway the fascination of Cuba was that of a near neighbour of the US living in the third world conditions of what was principally (but by no means entirely) a subsistence economy. This is the basis of the *raison d'être* of the lives of Santiago and Manolin who are forced to face daily life as an unending struggle with fate, chance and the elements which, to the comfortably placed readers of *Life Magazine*, was a world apart. Santiago is whole: complete and entire unto himself and not a cog in the wheel of a machine or a link in a chain of marketing, production and selling. He is certainly a man possessed of self knowledge and wisdom, hence his inner dignity.

The cultural context, then, is one of grinding poverty and subsistence, yet one in which the most apparently ordinary of people can achieve heroic status and retain an inner dignity, integrity and self control despite what seems to be, in worldly eyes, failure.

### The Challenge for the readers and students of the 21st Century

Hemingway uses the cultural context of Cuba in the 1950s (but more reminiscent of the 1930s) to confront the post-war materialist American society with a vision of something to shock and react to. In 1952 the US hero of WW2, McArthur, was denied the use of the bomb in the Korean War and was removed from office by President Truman: heroism was something on American minds at the time.

Our task is to link these contrasting cultures and see how each and the relations between them challenge our perceptions and experience fifty years on.

## Synopsis

The story accounts for five days in the life of **Santiago** an old Cuban fisherman, three of which are spent at sea. He is not the narrator: it is a third person narrative but imbued with his perspective, personality and consciousness. We hear both his spoken and unspoken thoughts as well as his conversations with his admirer, friend and apprentice, **Manolin**.

Santiago is out of luck: he has gone 84 days without catching a single fish. As a result Manolin's parents have ordered the young man to fish on another boat.

Nonetheless Manolin's respect and affection for the old man lead him to care for Santiago and provide basic essentials for him. Manolin is captivated not only by the old man's abilities as a deep-sea fisherman but also his recounting of past heroic adventures; his 'knowledge' of American Baseball and its contemporary hero, Joe Di Maggio.

Santiago dreams of 'lions roaming on the beach' in an Africa he sailed to as a young man.

On the 85th day Santiago sets sail and parts from the rest of the fishing boats. Shortly he hooks what he senses must be a huge fish. He allows it to exhaust itself by towing the old man far into the ocean. He cuts the three remaining baited lines to give himself extra line and eats the raw tuna he had caught and forgotten about. On the morning of the 86th day the old man sees the Marlin surface and realises he has a major battle on his hands.

Although he is not a religious man he prays; he thinks about his hero, Di Maggio: and recalls the successful arm-wrestling exploits of his youth.

Another day passes and Santiago's energies are virtually exhausted: but the Marlin is more so. He reels the great fish in and after considerable effort he straps it to the side of his skiff.

As he makes for Havana successive groups of sharks attack and, despite the old man's heroic attempts to repel them, they devour the flesh of the Marlin, leaving only the skeletal remains to be brought back to port.

On landing Santiago is utterly exhausted: he has tasted blood from his lungs. The skeleton is judged that of the largest fish any of his peers have ever seen.

Manolin looks after him and promises him that they will fish together again.

The old man falls asleep, again dreaming of lions on a distant shore.

*Santiago*: = James, a Spaniard from the Canaries originally. Biblically a fisherman, then a fisher of men. St. James was the patron saint of the conquistadores, the Spanish conquerors of the Caribbean and South America, who believed they were bringing heroic values to the New World.

## Culture

### Advice from the Examiners!

Remember that what you need is enough awareness of the cultural background to enable you to have a clear understanding of the story.

All you will need to tackle any task that will be set in the Examination should come from a careful reading of **the text itself**. You are not expected to have any separate knowledge.

### Activity 1

#### The way of life presented in the novel

- 1 Work individually on the differences between you and your family's way of life and the way of life of Manolin and Santiago in the novel. Make notes on the following five aspects:

##### *Climate and Environment*

How important is the weather to life where you live and how important is an understanding of the place you live in, compared with what is presented in the life of Santiago?

##### *Possessions*

What does Santiago possess that is not essential to his survival as a fisherman? What do you possess that is essential to your survival? What might we learn from the differences?

##### *... and how we pay for them*

What are the differences between the ways Santiago and Manolin pay for things and the way you do?

##### *Personal goals and ambition*

Write down three of yours and three of theirs. What are the differences?

##### *Relationships*

Manolin cares so much for the Old Man that he is prepared to defy his parents' order not to fish with him. Are there any issues on which you would defy your parents' wishes?

- 2 In discussion groups of three or four, compare your thoughts with others in the group. What five features of the lifestyle described in the novel are different from your own?

# Characterisation

## Santiago: an unlikely hero?

### Activity 2

- 1** Write down five qualities you would associate with a hero or heroine. You might like to think about a personal hero or heroine to focus on the qualities they possess which you admire.

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- a** Remind yourself of the introduction to the story (pp5–17). We are told that:
- The old man believes in luck: '85 is a lucky number' but is also '*salao*, the worst form of **unlucky**' as the story starts.
  - He is **undefeated**: 'his eyes were the same colour as the sea... cheerful and undefeated'.
  - He is **undeterred and unaffected** by the pity or contempt of others: the younger fisherman laugh at him, the older ones look at him and feel sad, *but he does not mind*.
  - He was also **respected**: no one would have thought of stealing from him.
  - He is **humble**: 'he knew he had attained humility and he knew it was not disgraceful and that it carried no loss of true pride'.
  - His constant **dream** is '**of the lions on the beach**' in the Africa he remembers of his boyhood. The lion is the king of the jungle and emblem of royalty.
- b** How many of these were on your original list of heroic qualities? How many of the ones that were not do you think should have been?

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- 2** Find a passage later in the novel in which Hemingway develops any one or more of these heroic qualities. Make notes, with page references, on these qualities.

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## Themes

### Advice from the Examiners!

We will assume that you have read the novel from start to finish and that you can select relevant episodes to support your response to the task you choose in the exam. We **do not** want or expect you to tell us story of the novel: use your knowledge and understanding to develop your response to the task that we set.

Since the novel was published over fifty years ago, critics and commentators have taken widely differing views of what it is about. For example, at the time some identified Santiago with the US war hero General McArthur who, when his victories in the Korean War had been snatched from him by the intervention of the Chinese Army, was sacked by President Truman when he publicly protested against the decision not to respond by using the atomic bomb against the Chinese.

### Activity 3

What did Ernest Hemingway want to say to his readers about life and what was important about it?

Here are some suggestions of ideas or themes in the novel:

- Man's relationship with nature: both good and bad, constructive and destructive.
- Heroism and nobility of character and behaviour.
- Manhood and what it means to be a man.
- Pride and ambition versus fate and chance.
- The importance of understanding and respecting the environment.

- 1 Work in pairs to discuss how many **other** important themes and ideas there are.
  - a Find a passage in the novel which deals with each of these themes.
  - b To get you started, look for the first bullet point above and at the passage on page 20 when the old man has just set sail. It begins "In the dark..." and ends on page 21 'the moon affects her as it does a woman, he thought'.
  - c Discuss the rival claims for what you think is the most important idea or theme in the novel.

## Themes *(continued)*

### Additional activity

*A question to think about:* you will not see this in the examination because it has been used as an example before.

### Is the old man a failure or a success?

You could say that he is a failure. After all, he has much to say about his abilities and aspirations when he sets out:

'Keep warm old man' the boy said. 'Remember we are in September.'

'The month when the great fish come,' the old man said. 'Anyone can be a fisherman in May.' **Page 12**

'I may not be as strong as I think,' the old man said. 'But I know many tricks and I have resolution.' **Page 16**

'Fish' he said, 'I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you before this day ends.' **Page 38**

He has a clear appreciation of what the fish will be worth to him:

'He's over 15 hundred pounds ... If he dresses at two thirds of that at thirty cents a pound? ... I need a pencil for that,' he said. **Page 70**

And yet by the end of the story all that is left is the skeletal remains of the marlin which is even mistaken for a shark by the tourists.

'I went out too far.' **Page 87**

The old man has lost the fish because he was too ambitious.  
When he faces the final onslaught of the sharks:

...he knew the fight was useless. **Page 86**

He knew that he was beaten now finally and without remedy. **Page 86**

He feels his luck has deserted him once again

'I am not lucky any more.' **Page 90**

## Themes (*continued*)

But you might also say that despite all the above he is successful **as a man** which is more important than as a fisherman.

- He is prepared to take on what is regarded as bad luck and defy it to prove a point about his fishing skills which he does successfully in so far that he captures the Marlin. '*He didn't beat you, not the fish.*' (page 90)
- He has shown massive compassion and respect for his 'enemy' while defeating it. '*Fish ... I love and respect you...*' (page 38)
- Manolin is more than eager to fish with him again after his return to port and is certainly no less in awe of him.
- He has survived against the deadliest opposition imaginable and killed several sharks which few if any others could possibly have done.
- He recognises his failings clearly and acknowledges them.
- He persists in fighting the sharks 'even though he knew it was useless.' (page 86)

Or you might want to argue that he is both a success **and** a failure!

What do you think?

### Advice from the Examiners!

Remember that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer to this kind of question. What we want to see is the skill with which you can use your knowledge of the story to develop your response to the chosen task.

## Style and structure 1

As you will have seen, there are no chapter or section divisions in the story at all. It is a continuous narrative that begins and ends with a conversation between Santiago and Manolin.

It can be split, fairly obviously into three sections:

- Havana 1: Santiago and Manolin.
- Santiago and the Sea.
- Havana 2: Santiago and Manolin.

But this still leaves pages 19-88 as one long central section.

### Activity 4

**1** How would you divide pages 19–88, the section described as ‘Santiago and the Sea’, into three sub sections? To get you started, you should think about:

- the old man setting out from port
- the eventual capture of the Marlin
- the attacks by the sharks on the return journey.

**2** Work in pairs to decide:

- a** exactly where your sub-divisions would come and why
- b** what we learn from the contrasts between them. For example:
  - How does Hemingway’s description of Santiago’s feelings about the Marlin as he captures it differ from his description of his feelings about the sharks?
  - How far are Santiago’s feelings about the sea as he sets sail confirmed by his experiences in the rest of the voyage?
  - How do the ways in which Santiago and Manolin talk to each other change between the beginning and the end of the story?

### Advice from the Examiners!

Whenever you are focusing on what to say in your response remember to keep the **whole text** in mind. Sometimes it can be helpful to start with the conclusion and work backwards.

## Style and structure 2

### Activity 5

An important feature of Hemingway's style is his use of dialogue to develop both characters and ideas: it is an important contrast to the third person narrative.

- 1** Remind yourself of the dialogue between Santiago and Manolin on pages 10–12: "What do you have to eat'... 'I go now for the sardines' the boy said.'" and re-read the passage at the end pages 90–92: 'Finally the old man woke ... The old man was dreaming of lions'.
- 2** In these two sections, how does Hemingway use what each says to the other to:
  - a** tell us about Santiago?
  - b** tell us about Manolin?
  - c** tell us about the relationship between them and the changes wrought within it by the old man's experiences at sea?
  - d** create very different moods and atmospheres?
- 3** What is the effect on the reader of the final conversation between the tourists in the light of your thoughts about the above?
- 4** Remind yourself of the conversation between Manolin and Santiago on pages 14–15; 'Tell me about baseball' the boy asked him ... But there is only one you.' and then of the conversation Santiago has with himself privately; himself, aloud; and with the fish on pages 48–9; 'If you're not tired, fish' ... 'I never had a bone spur.'
- 5** Baseball is a very important part of each passage, but for very different reasons. What are the reasons and how do the contrasts in what is said tell us so?
- 6** In each passage, how does Hemingway's choice of words link some of the themes and ideas we looked at in Activity Three with Santiago's character (Activity Two)? You should think about:
  - what is meant by the word 'great' which is repeated often in the first passage
  - why the idea of 'worthiness' is central to the second passage
  - why Santiago is so concerned with the tolerance of physical pain.

## Language

### Activity 6

Critics have described Hemingway's style as 'the iceberg effect' – because the extreme simplicity masks hidden depths of meaning (like an iceberg, which is mostly hidden beneath the surface of the ocean).

- 1 Remind yourself of the passage on page 54, another point at which Santiago is talking to himself. "The fish is my friend, too," he said aloud ... 'It is enough to live on the sea and kill our own true brothers.'"

This passage is densely packed with meaning, yet it is expressed in very simple vocabulary and sentence structure. The old man is debating:

- the conflicts in his feelings about the marlin
- the conflicts in his feelings about his relationship with nature
- the meaning of luck, fate and chance
- his feelings about himself
- the concept of worth.

- 2 For each of these bullet points write down the opposing ideas that they contain and the key words or phrases used to describe them.

### Activity 7

Another aspect of Hemingway's extreme economy of style is his choice of his characters' names.

**Manolin** is the diminutive (shortened) Spanish name for the Biblical Emmanuel, the redeemer.

**Santiago** (who, you remember is from the Canary Isles) is the Spanish name for St. James whose body was found in a rudderless, drifting boat. It was enshrined at Compostella in Spain. It rapidly became and remains one of the holiest of all Roman Catholic shrines.

**The Virgin of Cobre** (whose picture is in the old man's shack) was a statue of the Virgin Mary (mother of Jesus) which was found floating in the sea and brought to Cuba in 1628. It was lodged in the sanctuary of the chapel of Our Lady of Charity in Cobre, a small town in south east Cuba. In 1916 she was declared the patroness of the island. We are to assume that Santiago's wife has brought it back from a pilgrimage to the chapel.

- 1 Now that you know the significance of these names say what you think they add to the impact of the novel: see if you can get three points for each of them.
- 2 Now try these three from scratch: **Perico, Pedrico, Martin.**

**Language (continued)****Activity 8**

Hemingway makes occasional use of Spanish words and phrases for particular points of emphasis. What is being stressed by the use of the following words?

- page 5 *salao* – really bad luck

- page 25 *agua mala* – evil water: i.e. the jellyfish

- page 48 *gran ligas* – big leagues

- page 50 *el campeón* – the champion

- page 90 *brisa* – wind

**Advice from the Examiners!**

You will have seen by now that of all the things you can do with this novel, the essential one is to read, re-read it and then read it again. You can never know the text well enough.

## Exam practice question

Remind yourself of the passage below and then answer the question which follows:

“He was very fond of the flying fish as they were his principal friends on the ocean. He was sorry for the birds, especially the small delicate dark terns that were always flying, and looking and almost never finding, and he thought, ‘the birds have a harder life than we do except for the robber birds and the heavy strong ones. Why did they make the birds so delicate and fine as those sea swallows when the ocean can be so cruel? She is very kind and beautiful. But she can be so cruel and it comes so suddenly and such birds that fly, dipping and hunting, with their small sad voices are made too delicately for the sea.’”

What do you learn about the old man’s feelings about the sea and its creatures here and in one or two other moments in his voyage?

### Remember to:

- support your answer by referring to and quoting from the novel
- put quotation marks round any words or phrases you use from the novel.

### What to do

- 1** Locate the passage in the text, read it in context and think carefully about the old man’s feelings, remembering, as we have noted above, that they are almost always in conflict with each other. (Note that the passage comes near to the beginning of the story – look back at the work you did on structure, above).
- 2** Try to get to the feelings and write about them, making sure you include an explanation of the language Hemingway uses to describe them.
- 3** Think of another passage in which Santiago’s feelings are prominent (for example, we’ve already looked at one above, about baseball. Others might be pages 76–84 as he responds to the attacks of the sharks).
- 4** Tease out the strands of feelings. Write about them, supporting what you say with some consideration of the writer’s choice of language.
- 5** Relate what you have written to the beginning and the conclusion of the novel. Have Santiago’s feelings changed or are they still much the same?