

THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

Introduction

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1899, the son of a doctor and a music teacher. He began his writing career as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. At age eighteen, he volunteered to serve as a Red Cross ambulance driver in World War I and was sent to Italy, where he was badly injured by shrapnel. Hemingway later fictionalized his experience in Italy in what some consider his greatest novel, *A Farewell to Arms*. In 1921, Hemingway moved to Paris, where he served as a correspondent for the *Toronto Daily Star*. In Paris, he fell in with a group of American and English expatriate writers that included F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Ford Madox Ford. In the early 1920s, Hemingway began to achieve fame as a chronicler of the disaffection felt by many American youth after World War I—a generation of youth whom Stein memorably dubbed the “Lost Generation.” His novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) established him as a dominant literary voice of his time. His spare, charged style of writing was revolutionary at the time and would be imitated, for better or for worse, by generations of aspiring young writers to come. After leaving Paris, Hemingway wrote on bullfighting, published short stories and articles, covered the Spanish Civil War as a journalist, and published his best-selling novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). These pieces helped Hemingway build up the mythic breed of masculinity for which he wished to be known. His work and his life revolved around big-game hunting, fishing, boxing, and bullfighting, endeavors that he tried to master as seriously as he did writing. In the 1930s, Hemingway lived in Key West, Florida, and later in Cuba, and his years of experience fishing the Gulf Stream and the Caribbean provided an essential background for the vivid descriptions of the fisherman’s craft in *The Old Man and the Sea*. In 1936 he wrote a piece for *Esquire* about a

Cuban fisherman who was dragged out to sea by a great marlin, a game fish that typically weighs hundreds of pounds. Sharks had destroyed the fisherman's catch by the time he was found half-delirious by other fishermen. This story seems an obvious seed for the tale of Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*. A great fan of baseball, Hemingway liked to talk in the sport's lingo, and by 1952, he badly "needed a win." His novel *Across the River and Into the Trees*, published in 1950, was a disaster. It was his first novel in ten years, and he had claimed to friends that it was his best yet. Critics, however, disagreed and called the work the worst thing Hemingway had ever written. Many readers claimed it read like a parody of Hemingway. The control and precision of his earlier prose seemed to be lost beyond recovery. The huge success of *The Old Man and the Sea*, published in 1952, was a much-needed vindication. The novella won the 1953 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and it very likely cinched the Nobel Prize for Hemingway in 1954, as it was cited for particular recognition by the Nobel Academy. It would be the last novel published in his lifetime. Although the novella helped to regenerate Hemingway's wilting career, it has since been met by divided critical opinion. While some critics have praised *The Old Man and the Sea* as a new classic that takes its place among such established American works as William Faulkner's short story "The Bear" and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, others have attacked the story as "imitation Hemingway" and find fault with the author's departure from the uncompromising realism with which he made his name. Because Hemingway was a writer who always relied heavily on autobiographical sources, some critics, not surprisingly, eventually decided that the novella served as a thinly veiled attack upon them. According to this reading, Hemingway was the old master at the end of his career being torn apart by—but ultimately triumphing over—critics on a feeding frenzy. But this reading ultimately reduces *The Old Man and the Sea* to little more than an act of literary revenge. The more compelling interpretation asserts that the novella is a parable about life itself, in particular man's struggle for triumph in a world that seems designed to destroy him. Despite the soberly life-affirming tone of the novella, Hemingway was, at the end of his life, more and more prone to debilitating bouts of depression. He committed suicide in 1961 in Ketchum, Idaho.