

45 STUDY QUESTIONS AND ESSAY TOPICS STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of the sea in *The Old Man and the Sea*? The rich waters of the Gulf Stream provide a revolving cast of bit players—birds and beasts—that the old man observes and greets. Through Santiago's interactions with these figures, his character emerges. In fact, Santiago is so connected to these waters, which he thinks of goodhumoredly as a sometimes fickle lover, that the sea acts almost like a lens through which the reader views his character. Santiago's interaction with the weary warbler, for instance, shows not only his kindness but also, as he thinks about the hawks that will inevitably hunt the tiny bird, a philosophy that dominates and structures his life. His strength, resolve, and pride are measured in terms of how far out into the gulf he sails. The sea also provides glimpses of the depth of Santiago's knowledge: in his comments about the wind, the current, and the friction of the water reside an entire lifetime of experience, skill, and dedication. When, at the end of the novella, Manolin states that he still has much to learn from the old man, it seems an expression of the obvious.

2. Santiago is considered by many readers to be a tragic hero, in that his greatest strength—his pride—leads to his eventual downfall. Discuss the role of pride in Santiago's plight. At first, Santiago's plight seems rather hopeless. He has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish, and he is the laughingstock of his small village. Regardless of his past, the old man determines to change his luck and sail out farther than he or the other fishermen ever have before. His commitment to sailing out to where the big fish are testifies to the depth of his pride. Later, after the sharks have destroyed his prize marlin, Santiago chastises himself for his hubris, claiming that it has ruined both the marlin and himself. Yet, Santiago's pride also enables him to achieve what he otherwise would not. Not until he meets and battles the marlin are his skills as a fisherman truly put to the test. In other words, the pride that leads to the destruction of his quarry also helps him earn the deeper respect of the village fisherman and secures him the prized companionship of the boy.

3. Discuss religious symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea*. To what effect does Hemingway employ such images? Christian symbolism, especially images that refer to the crucifixion of Christ, is present throughout *The Old Man and the Sea*. During the old man's battle with the marlin, his palms are cut by his fishing cable. Given Santiago's suffering and willingness to sacrifice his life, the wounds are

suggestive of Christ's stigmata, and Hemingway goes on to portray the old man as a Christ-like martyr. As soon as the sharks arrive, Santiago makes a noise one would make "feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood." And the old man's struggle up the hill to his village with his mast across his shoulders is evocative of Christ's march toward Calvary. Even the position in which Santiago collapses on his bed—he lies face down with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up—brings to mind the image of Christ on the cross. Hemingway employs these images in order to link Santiago to Christ, who exemplified transcendence by turning loss into gain, defeat into triumph, and even death into life.