

Lesson 6 Adventures in Literature

The Old Man and the Sea

The Old Man and the Sea is about an old man called Santiago. Santiago hadn't caught a fish in 84 days, so people thought he was unlucky, maybe cursed. In order to change his terrible luck, Santiago decided to go out into the deep ocean, far beyond the other fishermen. At first, he only caught a small tuna, but at the end of the 85th day, a powerful, magnificent marlin bit Santiago's fishing hook. The fish was so strong it dragged Santiago's boat for three days. Santiago learned to respect the fish, to admire its courage, and to appreciate its beauty. When it finally died, he saw it was too big to put inside the boat. Instead, he tied it to the side of his boat and tried to return home. Unfortunately, a shark smelled the marlin's blood and threatened to eat Santiago's prized fish.

Santiago saw the shark's jaws opening and closing in anticipation. He knew this shark no longer cared about the dangers of a boat or of a fisherman. The smell of blood took away the shark's fear, making it brave and reckless. Santiago didn't have much rope left over from tying up the marlin, but he tightened the short remaining piece of rope into a knot on his spear. The shark got closer and closer, mouth open and teeth shining in the sunlight.

Santiago's mind felt strong and clear, his willpower restored. The spear wasn't very long, too short to hit the shark before it arrived at the marlin. Still, Santiago refused to give up. The shark's eyes flashed and he bit the beautiful fish just above the tail. It ripped and bit and took a huge piece of meat — at least 40 pounds — out of the giant marlin.

The old man could hear the marlin's skin tearing and bones breaking as he drove the spear into the shark's head. He pushed the weapon in right behind the eyes and above the neck, where the brain was. It turned over, and he could see the shark's eyes rolling in its head. It hit the water with its tail and turned the ocean water white with its struggling.

Santiago tried to get his spear out, but couldn't. He had cast the spear too deep into the shark's body, and the rope was too short. Even though its body struggled, the shark was already dead. After a moment, it lay still on the surface before sinking slowly into the water, taking the spear with it.

So much of the marlin's blood flowed into the water from where it had been bitten. Santiago knew more sharks would come before long. He had no spear, and his boat was still many miles from the land. The fisherman knew he would fail, understanding that he had no hope of protecting the beautiful marlin. Santiago didn't care. He would struggle as long as he could, even if he could not succeed.

"A man can be destroyed," he said. "But not defeated."

Santiago turned back to his boat and looked at the great fish. The shark had ruined the marlin's powerful tail and made it so ugly it hurt Santiago's spirit whenever he looked at its torn flesh. Santiago felt sorry for catching the marlin and wanted to apologize to the beautiful animal.

"Don't think, old man," he said. "Sail on this course and take it when it comes."

But he couldn't stop thinking. Alone on the ocean, with the poor marlin's blood spilling into the water, all he could do was think. He thought of the great baseball player Joe DiMaggio. He wondered if Joe DiMaggio could have killed the shark without losing the spear. Santiago thought of his own injured hands and wondered how Joe DiMaggio could play baseball so well in spite of his own injuries. He wondered if he, like Joe DiMaggio, could ignore the unbearable pain and fatigue in his body long enough to meet his goals.

"Think about something cheerful, old man," he said.

"Every minute now you are closer to home. You sail lighter for the loss of 40 pounds."

However, Santiago knew this was false hope. Too much blood in the water. Too many sharks. Too far from land with these strong ocean currents. Still, the fisherman promised he would continue to fight.

Neither fear nor the loss of his spear could take away his determination. He had to come up with a new weapon, removing the rowing oars and attaching his knife to one.

"Now," he said. "I am still an old man. But I am not unarmed."

The breeze got stronger and his boat sped up. He felt fresh, and his determination returned. The sharks would almost certainly take his beautiful marlin, but Santiago would never cease fighting them. A man can be destroyed, but never defeated.