



Old Man at the Bridge by Ernest Hemmingway

Title: "Old man at the Bridge"

Writer: Ernest Hemmingway

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Genre: Short Story

User

Hemmingway worked as a foreign correspondent covering the Spanish Civil War for the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA). He originally drafted a news article about the real-life events of "Old Man at the Bridge" before deciding to submit it to a magazine as a short story instead.

Definitions

Pontoon bridge – A bridge that is made of large hollow containers filled with air.

Fascism is a form of government that has a type of one-party dictatorship. They work for a totalitarian one-party state. Fascism puts nation and often race above the individual.

Republicans – in republican systems of government, power is held by the representatives that they elect.

Spanish Civil War – (July 17, 1936 – March 28, 1939) was a military revolt (led by General Franco) against the Republican government of Spain. A central goal of the rebels was the destruction of left-wing organisations. When an initial military coup failed to win control of the entire country, a bloody civil war ensued. The Nationalists, as the rebels were called, received aid from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The Republicans received aid from the Soviet Union as well as from the International Brigades, composed of volunteers from Europe (France) and the United States.

The war was an outcome of a polarization of Spanish life and politics that had developed over several decades. The Nationalist were most Roman Catholics, landowners, businessmen and part of the military. The Republican were urban workers, most agricultural labourers, and many of the educated middle class.

The Republicans surrendered, bringing the war to an end. Up to a million lives were lost during the conflict. General Franco served as dictator of Spain until his death in 1975.

Analysis

The bare minimum is told so it is up to the reader to interpret and to fully understand the story.

The old man is very concerned about his animals which he left behind. He avoids speaking directly about death, but the intensity of his anxiety suggests that their deaths are indeed on his mind.

The old man's fate is apparently sealed when he finds he cannot walk any further.

The old man was sitting by the roadside for a very long time. The dust on his clothes was from the heavy traffic passing by.

He was exhausted by travelling so far and has lost hope to live because he had to leave his animals to their own fate.

He mentioned that he was "without politics" which means he did not support any side of the war. In his opinion he was at a stage in his life where he only wanted to be with the animals who gave him joy.

Symbolism

The story takes place on a **bridge**. This setting symbolizes an obstacle to overcome, in this case the border between life and death. If the old man could manage to get over the bridge, he might have a chance of survival.

The **cat** symbolizes the survivors, as cats are associated with the thought of having nine lives and generally being independent creatures.

The **pigeons** symbolizes the ones that are able to flee the war. The fact that the pigeons are later being called doves may give the old man a minor hope, as doves are a symbol of peace, and could therefore symbolize the hope of peace during wartime.

The **goat** is a sacrificial animal, which symbolizes the death of the old man and the numerous other innocent victims of war.

The story takes place on an **Easter Sunday**, which was the day of resurrection for Jesus. In this story it symbolizes the change in society that happens as war unravels; the hope from both parties of the war that their victory will lead to a resurrection of a better society (rebirth and change).

The **old man** symbolize all the innocent creatures (people and animals) whose lives are destroyed by war. The devastating effects of war on citizens who have nothing to gain from conflict.

The **old man's fate** is symbolic of the lives of so many ordinary people who have suffered during the war.

Theme

The impact of war on the innocent (the tragedy of war). The author's intention is to illustrate the way wars disrupt the lives of innocent people who are caught up in the middle, also the way it frustrates those who cannot do anything about it.

Climax

The old man thanks the soldier and says that he knows no one in the direction the trucks go. The officer keeps telling the old man to leave the place while watching the far end of the bank for enemy activity. The man tries to walk but collapses.

Irony

Like a goat which is sanctified, the old man's fate is sealed on an Easter Sunday, a day of hope and faith.

Questions

Why was the old man's clothes dusty?

The old man was sitting by the roadside for a very long time. The dust on his clothes was from the heavy traffic passing by.

Why does the old man look bland and tired?

He was exhausted by travelling so far and has lost hope to live because he had to leave his animals to their own fate.

What does the old man mean when he states "I am without politics"?

He mentioned that he was "without politics" which means he did not support any side of the war. In his opinion he was at a stage in his life where he only wanted to be with the animals who gave him joy.

What is the irony in "Old Man at the Bridge?"

The irony is that like a goat which is sanctified, the old man's fate is sealed on an Easter Sunday, a day of hope and faith.

Why are many people crossing the bridge?

The story is set during the Spanish Civil War and people are crossing the bridge to protect themselves from the impending attack by the enemy troops.

What is the cause of the old man's worry and guilt?

The old man believed that he has a responsibility to take care of his animals. He was not able to fulfill his responsibility and was worried about them.

Why doesn't the old man cross the bridge and escape to a safer place?

- He already travelled twelve kilometers
- He was too tired to go any further
- He was weak
- He had no family and left his beloved animals behind
- He felt helpless as he could not save his animals; he surrendered himself to his fate.

What statements from the story suggest that the old man is about to give up on life? Quote specific statements to back your answer.

"Thank you," he said and got on to his feet, swayed from side to side and then sat down backwards in the dust. "I was taking care of the animals," he said dully, but no longer to me. "

He was lacking strength to continue the journey. It is as if he gave up hope when he speaks to himself.

What is the setting of the story? Give details from the story to support your answer.

It is taking place at a bridge. "There was a pontoon bridge across the river and carts, trucks, and men, woman and children were crossing it."

How is the narrator portrayed in this story? How does he treat the old man?

The narrator is a caring person as he is trying to convince the old man to gather the strength to carry on. He takes the time to listen to the man although they are in danger.

Answer the following questions in your literature book. The answers will be provided next week (week 3)

1. What was the old man doing in his native town?
2. What is special about the day the narrator encounters the old man?
3. Why does the old man leave the animals behind?
4. Which animals is the man least concerned about?
5. The trucks are crossing the bridge and going where?
6. What is the old man's native town?
7. What is the narrator's job?
8. How old is the old man?