

# Old Man at the Bridge



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Ernest Hemingway grew up in a suburb of Chicago, spending summers with his family in rural Michigan. After high school, he got a job writing for *The Kansas City Star*, but left after only six months to join the Red Cross Ambulance Corps during World War I, where he was injured and awarded the Silver Medal of Military Valor. Afterward, he lived in Ontario and Chicago, where he met his first wife, Hadley Richardson. In 1921 they moved to Paris, where he worked on his writing and also developed a long friendship with F. Scott Fitzgerald and other ex-patriate American writers of the “lost generation.” After the 1926 publication of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, he divorced Hadley and married Arkansas native Pauline Pfeiffer. The couple moved to Florida, where Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), which became a bestseller. Hemingway finally moved to Spain to serve as a war correspondent in the Spanish Civil War, a job that inspired his famous 1939 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. After its publication, he met his third wife, Martha Gellhorn. Hemingway married his fourth and final wife, Mary Hemingway, in 1946, and the couple spent the next fourteen years living in Cuba. In 1953 Hemingway won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for his novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, and in 1954 he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. After a final move to Idaho, Hemingway took his own life in 1961, following in the footsteps of his father who had died by suicide in 1928. Hemingway left behind his wife and three sons.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Spanish Civil War began in 1936, at a time when two other European countries were already under brutal, anti-democratic regimes: Fascist Italy, under the rule of Benito Mussolini since 1922, and Nazi Germany, controlled by Adolf Hitler since 1933. The Spanish Civil War exacerbated political divisions across Europe. On the right, it intensified fears of Communism, while on the left, it bolstered opposition to Fascism. Many non-Spanish citizens joined the Republican cause voluntarily, fighting in the Communist-run International Brigades. However, the Nationalists ultimately won the war in 1939 and Francisco Franco ruled Spain as a military dictator until his death in 1975. The war became famous for the atrocities that were committed on both sides. Today, the Spanish Civil War is often seen as setting the stage for the Second World War, as various fascist, nationalistic political regimes were taking power across Europe.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Two of Hemingway’s most famous novels are also about war: *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) takes place during WWI, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) takes place during the Spanish Civil War, just like “Old Man at the Bridge.” His interest in writing about war, death, and the failure of conventional values like religion was shared with other members of the Lost Generation, a group of writers who came of age during WWI and were deeply affected by their exposure to the horrors of warfare. After WWI, many such American and British writers formed an expatriate community in Paris and created lasting intellectual and personal bonds. Other notable writers who belonged to the Lost Generation include F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, and William Faulkner.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “Old Man at the Bridge”
- **When Written:** 1938
- **Where Written:** Spain
- **When Published:** 1938
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Near bridge over the Ebro River in Spain, during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)
- **Climax:** The old man tries to walk forward but collapses
- **Antagonist:** Alienation, Fascists
- **Point of View:** First Person from the Soldier’s perspective

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Based on a True Story.** Hemingway worked as a foreign correspondent covering the Spanish Civil War for the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA), and 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.

**A Pair of Bridges.** Hemingway’s novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) also takes place by a bridge that the Republican fighters are trying to blow up during the Spanish Civil War.



## PLOT SUMMARY

An old man sits alongside a bridge, exhausted and covered in dust. Many people are hurrying to cross the bridge with their families and belongings, but he is too tired to proceed. They are villagers who are fleeing from the fighting in the Spanish Civil War.

The narrator, a soldier for the Republican (left-wing) side, spots the old man as he crosses the bridge to see if the enemy, the right-wing Nationalists or Fascists, are advancing behind them. When the narrator returns, most of the other evacuees are gone but the old man is still sitting on the ground. The narrator engages with him, trying to rouse him to keep moving toward safety. The old man says that he came from the town of San Carlos, where he was taking care of **animals**. The narrator wonders why the old man is telling him this until the man explains that he didn't want to desert his creatures, so he was the last person to leave his village. He worries about the goats, pigeons, and cat that he has left behind to die. Meanwhile, the narrator worries about the advancing forces who will surely try to kill them both.

When the narrator urges the old man to try to walk until he can catch a truck that could carry him away, the old man can only fall back down, repeating, "I was taking care of animals." The narrator concludes that he cannot help the old man, and presumably leaves him to die there.



## CHARACTERS

**The Old Man** – The old man, the story's central character, has fled his hometown to escape the encroaching violence of the Spanish Civil War. Throughout the story, he is sitting by the side of the road, exhausted from attempting to travel to safety and feeling that he can no longer go on. When the narrator (a soldier) stops to try to convince him to move along to a safer place, the old man reveals that he was reluctant to leave his hometown (the very mention of which is the only thing in the story that makes him happy) because he was the caretaker for a number of **animals** who might not survive without him. While at first he risked his life to stay and care for them, he evidently valued his own life enough to leave them behind when a captain ordered him to evacuate because of artillery fire. The old man says that he has no family, doesn't know anyone in Barcelona (where the fleeing masses are heading), and has no politics, and therefore no stake in the war. Without his animals, he has no great reason to live, and he tries and fails to walk again when the narrator urges him to keep moving towards safety. Feeling that he cannot help the man, the narrator moves on, concluding that the only luck the old man would ever have was that his cat, at least, was likely to survive, and that the enemy planes were grounded for the moment. Presumably, the old man is left to die.

**The narrator** – The narrator is a soldier for the Republican (left-wing) side in the Spanish Civil War. When carrying out his duties of determining the extent of the enemy advance, he finds an old man who is sitting by the side of the road in the enemy's path. He talks with the old man, trying to convince him to flee to safety, but he is constantly distracted by thoughts of the enemy's advancement. His responses to the man are often

perfunctory or dismissive, such as when the man earnestly and emotionally inquires about whether the **animals** he left behind might survive, and the narrator simply answers, "Why not?" While the narrator does encourage the man to flee, he never tries to understand who the man is or what might motivate him, and he fairly quickly decides that, since there is "nothing to do about" the old man, he must leave. The reader concludes that the old man will die.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### LIFE, DEATH, AND WAR

In "Old Man at the Bridge," the narrator—a soldier in the Spanish Civil War—tries to convince an old man sitting on the side of the road to get himself to safety before the fighting arrives. While the narrator clearly worries that the old man will die if he stays there, the old man isn't worried about his own safety; instead, he worries aloud about the **animals** he left behind when he fled his hometown. Both the old man and the narrator, then, are concerned with the survival of others (the old man about the animals, and the narrator about the old man). However, for both men, this concern is futile—after all, the animals have been abandoned, and the narrator walks away from the old man at the end of the story because there was "nothing to do about him." In this way, Hemingway shows the horror of war without even depicting any bloodshed. War takes lives ravenously and senselessly, even those not directly involved in the fighting, and it leaves people devaluing life, unable to perform even the simplest acts of salvation.

From the outset, Hemingway is clear that the war—while still somewhat distant—is ominously approaching. In the opening scene, for instance, many exhausted people are fleeing across the pontoon bridge. The "carts, trucks, and men, women and children" are "stagger[ing]" and "plodd[ing] along in the ankle deep dust," all of them "heading out of it all." If there's any doubt as to what they're fleeing, the narrator quickly notes that his job is crossing the bridge to "find out to what point the enemy had advanced," making it clear that the violence of war has not yet arrived, but it is coming. While the narrator gives no emotional commentary about this approaching violence, the atmosphere is one of anxiety and dread, and his concern for the old man—his repeated urging that the man continue on to safety—betrays that he believes the man will die if he remains there.

For the old man, however, the cost of war is not simply his life, since by the time the story begins, the war has already taken what matters most to him. When the old man tells the narrator the name of his hometown, “it gave him pleasure to mention it and he smiled.” This is the only time that the story depicts a positive emotion, and it is associated with the memory of the town the old man has since fled (presumably for good) due to artillery fire. Therefore, even this small moment of happiness is merely an indication of what the man has lost. Furthermore, when he fled his hometown, the old man had to leave behind the animals for which he had been caring: two goats, a cat, and four pairs of pigeons. It’s clear that this duty was important to him, because he was “the last one to leave” once the town was evacuated. Presumably, he stayed to care for the animals long past the moment when it was wise to flee. The other emotion that Hemingway flags in the story is the old man’s anxiety over the animals—he says to himself that, “There is no need to be unquiet about the cat. But the others. Now what do you think about the others?” Clearly, the man is “unquiet” about all of these animals. The danger they’re in torments him, and he worries about them more than he worries about his own life, which is endangered by his decision to sit by the road instead of fleeing. To him, though, the weight of what he has lost seems more important than what he might lose—his life—by remaining by the bridge.

While the narrator does try to get the old man to safety, his efforts and sympathy are much less than the old man’s acute concern for the animals. This begins to suggest the dehumanizing aspects of being involved in war. For example, the narrator doesn’t seem to take the old man’s concern for the animals seriously. When he tries to comfort the old man that the animals will “come through it all right,” the old man asks, “You think so?” and the narrator’s blasé and insincere response is, “Why not.” Clearly, in the face of war, the narrator finds himself unable to relate to a concern for animal life. Furthermore, the whole time the narrator is speaking with the old man, he doesn’t seem to be listening. Twice in a row the narrator asks the man what animals he left, and while the repetition might be because the man was vague in his first response, the narrator is explicitly thinking about the approaching battle while the old man speaks, which makes it plausible that he simply hasn’t heard the man respond. Even while asking emotionally fraught questions, the narrator’s mind is elsewhere: “‘And you have no family?’ I asked, watching the far end of the bridge where a few last carts were hurrying down the slope of the bank.” Therefore, even though the narrator is earnestly trying to get the man to move, he is not relating to him as a person, which is perhaps why he gives up on the man quickly, stating that there was “nothing to do about him.” Tragically, it seems that proximity to war has also made the old man devalue his own life, while the narrator—a soldier whose job is to kill the enemy—has seemingly begun to disregard the lives of others.

Hemingway notes at the end of the story that the day is Easter Sunday—the day of Christ’s resurrection, which evokes the possibility of eternal salvation for mankind. By contrast, while these two men both clearly desire to save lives (whether animal or human), the circumstances of war make them unable to succeed in even simple acts of salvation: caring for animals or making an old man cross a bridge. If Christ gave his life for mankind, while these men have begun to devalue life itself, then Hemingway suggests that the battlefield is a place without humanity or redemption.



## ALIENATION

The title character of “Old Man at the Bridge” has no family, no politics, and nowhere to go. The violence of the Spanish Civil War has forced the old man to flee his hometown and his beloved **animals**, which are seemingly the only sources of joy in his life. He sits by the side of the road while others flee, apparently resigned to dying there when the violence arrives. The story implies that it’s the man’s alienation that has drained him of the will to live—after all, he has no political stake in the conflict, nobody who can take him in, and he cannot return to his animals, which seem to be his only responsibility and connection to others. Furthermore, the narrator (who treats him with some detachment) fails to make a difference. In this way, Hemingway shows that war alienates people from the connections that are meaningful to them, and the man’s presumed death suggests that alienated life is perhaps not worth living at all.

Throughout the story, Hemingway illustrates how alienated the old man is from other people. This is apparent from the very beginning, as the old man is the only person left behind by the crowds of people crossing the river to safety, none of whom concern themselves with this exhausted and feeble man. Furthermore, when the soldier asks the old man about whether he has family, the man responds that he has “only the animals” that he left behind. Finally, when the narrator suggests that the old man catch a truck for Barcelona, the old man points out that he knows “no one in that direction,” which suggests that human connection is important to him but lacking. In order to motivate himself to flee to safety, he has to be going towards someone familiar, but he seems to have nobody except the narrator himself, who is a distracted stranger with his own problems to attend.

In addition to his alienation from other people, the old man has “no politics,” which means that he has no allegiance to others in the war, and no stake in the violence that has displaced him. The rest of the civilian evacuees may not have strong political leanings, either (the story doesn’t indicate that any of them support a particular side), but the manner in which the old man asserts that he has “no politics” suggests that he does not have any larger shared beliefs that would have joined him to others. Religion also unites people, but the old man does not appear to

be religious. He never refers to God or prays aloud for the animals, despite his great concern for them. By rejecting politics and religion, the old man alienates himself further from the people around him and from the circumstances of his life. Without people or beliefs to live for, he has little incentive to push himself past his physical exhaustion.

Despite his alienation, the old man is invested in forging connections with others, and it seems briefly as though connecting with the narrator might save his life. When the old man consults the narrator about the fate of his animals, he does so because he “ha[s] to share his worry with some one.” The old man, then, is yearning to have his concerns acknowledged and understood, thereby making him less alone. However, the narrator does not compassionately address the man’s grief. Throughout their interaction, the narrator refrains from getting overly involved with the old man. He responds to the old man inattentively, becoming distracted even when asking personal questions (such as whether the man has family) or when discussing emotional subjects (such as the fate of the man’s beloved animals). Based on the man’s yearning for companionship and his reluctance to go to Barcelona where he doesn’t know anyone, a reader might guess that if someone really made an effort to make the old man feel understood and cared for, he might find the strength to continue on and spare his own life. However, the narrator does not connect with the man on that level, and he ultimately gives up on the man, leaving him by the side of the road.

The narrator’s paltry efforts at motivating the man and his distracted attention to the man’s deepest fears seem like moral failings, an uncompassionate way to treat another person in need. This is perhaps starkest when the narrator decides to leave the man because “There was nothing to do about him,” even though the narrator has tried hardly anything at all. Furthermore, the narrator notes that the old man will have no more “luck,” which seems to absolve the narrator of responsibility by chalking the man’s fate up to luck rather than to the narrator’s own choice to abandon him. While this all makes the narrator seem like his emotional detachment is a moral failing, Hemingway also takes seriously the possibility that the narrator’s alienation is the very characteristic that saves his life.

When worrying about his animals, after all, the old man tells the narrator, “It’s better not to think about [their fates].” Perhaps detaching from the animals might have helped the old man continue, but he is not capable of taking his own advice: he never stops thinking and talking about the creatures. This grief, coupled with his need for connection with others, seem to inhibit him from moving towards safety by making him feel that his life is not meaningful. By contrast, the soldier seems much better at not thinking about the harsh fates that others will experience. His ability to detach from the old man allows him to move to safety and continue on with his difficult job of

preparing for combat. This outcome suggests that an excess of compassion for others is a liability in war, and that alienation can help one survive. However, as the man’s choice to stay by the side of the road suggests, it’s possible that an alienated life is empty and not worth living.



## RELIGION AND MORALITY

“Old Man at the Bridge,” a wartime story set on Easter Sunday, is full of both implicit and explicit references to Christianity. However, none of the story’s characters seem to have faith in God or practice Christian morality, and all of the story’s Christian references wind up corrupted: the doves that symbolize peace and hope have an uncertain fate, the old man evokes the Good Shepherd but he fails to care for his flock, and the narrator at first seems like he could be the Good Samaritan, but he does not put in the effort to save the old man’s life. By showing the breakdown of religious meaning, both symbolically and in people’s everyday lives, Hemingway highlights that war drives people to immorality and inhumanity.

The old man in the story corresponds to a Biblical figure associated with love, mercy, and sacrifice: the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd (a representation of Christ) loves and protects all of God’s creatures, even to the extent of sacrificing his own life for them. In compassionately caring for his animals, and even risking his life by postponing his evacuation from a war zone, the old man clearly resembles the Good Shepherd. However, when an army captain tells the old man that he must flee artillery fire, the old man evacuates, abandoning his animals instead of dying to protect them. This, coupled with the old man’s presumed death at the end of the story, darkly hints that the compassion and sacrifice of the Good Shepherd have diminished—or even outright disappeared—in wartime.

Furthermore, the relationship between the old man and the narrator evokes the Biblical story of the Good Samaritan. When the Good Samaritan finds an injured stranger who has been left to die at the side of the road, he stops to treat the man, saving his life. Similarly, in Hemingway’s story, when the old man cannot walk any further to escape the advancing army, he sits on the side of the road and the narrator stops to urge him to flee to safety. However, these stories diverge in an important respect: the Good Samaritan goes to great pains to successfully save the injured man’s life, while the narrator’s attempts to move the man to safety are perfunctory and ultimately fail. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is meant to illustrate the Biblical teaching that one should “love thy neighbor as thyself,” but everyone in “Old Man at the Bridge” fails to live up to this ethical imperative. This suggests that wartime has caused people to abandon their morals, leaving a selfish and chaotic world.

Just as Hemingway darkly twists his references to the Good Shepherd and the Good Samaritan, he subverts Christian

symbolism with his tragic invocation of doves. In the Bible, doves carried the olive branch to Noah as proof of God's miraculous redemption of humankind, making doves symbolic of hope and peace in Christian tradition. However, the meaning of doves in this story is not so clear. While the old man calls his birds "pigeons," the narrator wistfully refers to them by their more poetic name, "doves." This perhaps demonstrates the narrator's longing for peace and the promise of a world renewed amidst the horrifying reality of war. However, it's significant that the fate of these doves—symbols of hope and peace—is uncertain. The old man has left their cage open so that they might fly to safety, but both the narrator's and the old man's expressions of confidence in their safety ring hollow. By implying that the doves may die in artillery fire, Hemingway darkly hints that war not only destroys peace, but also hope for redemption.

The story's most explicit reference to Christianity is the narrator's casual mention at the story's conclusion that these events take place on Easter Sunday, and this is perhaps Hemingway's most profound twisting of Christian imagery. Easter is the day on which Jesus rose from the dead following his crucifixion at the hands of his enemies, and the holiday embodies the miraculous possibility of salvation for mankind. However, Hemingway writes that "It was Easter Sunday and the Fascists were advancing toward the Ebro." Despite their Christian faith, the Fascists (the Spanish Civil War's most firmly Catholic group) have not paused their violent campaign. This associates them with the bloodlust of Christ's enemies and perhaps suggests that their faith is hollow. Furthermore, the narrator himself clearly has some connection to Christianity, as he does note the date. This casual mention of Easter, just after failing to save a life that should have been salvageable, suggests that the narrator is not overly troubled by the moral principles that this holiday evokes.

Despite Hemingway's explicit and implicit references to Christianity throughout the story, religion is notably absent from the lives of the story's characters. Neither the old man nor the narrator ever suggest praying for the survival of the animals, and they both seem to have a fatalistic attitude about the future. After all, neither man seems to believe that God will intervene on anybody's behalf: the old man suggests that he shouldn't think about the bleak fates of his creatures, and the narrator notes at the end that the old man has run out of luck. Therefore, Hemingway depicts religion as impotent and hollow in the face of war. The characters seem to have no faith, and even Hemingway's mentions of Christianity gesture towards abdication of morality and hopelessness about the future.



## ANIMALS

The old man's beloved animals symbolize innocent victims of war. The cat, which "can look out for itself," is the most resilient creature because it is autonomous and does not depend on others to survive. It is also a solitary animal, and in an ugly conflict where people must fend for themselves, the cat represents someone who can stay alive but won't necessarily help others. The flock of birds, first called pigeons by the old man and later called doves by the narrator, can escape from the unlocked cage and fly away from the artillery. The fact that the narrator refers to them as "doves" (a symbol of peace) after the old man spoke of them as pigeons reveals his longing for the war to end. The uncaged doves may appear to be a symbol of hope, but their fate is both uncertain and irrelevant to the story's dark ending. Finally, the goats come to be associated with the narrator himself, as they have no chance of surviving with nobody to care for them, just as the old man himself will likely die without family or friends to help him escape. Likewise, just as the old man says that it's "better not to think about [the fate of the goats]," the narrator comes to believe that it's better to move along and not think too much about the old man.



## QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* published in 1987.


### Old Man at the Bridge Quotes

☞ "And you have no family?" I asked, watching the far end of the bridge where a few last carts were hurrying down the slope of the bank.

"No," he said, "only the animals I stated. The cat, of course, will be all right. A cat can look out for itself, but I cannot think what will become of the others."

**Related Characters:** The narrator, The Old Man (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 58

#### Explanation and Analysis

The old man tells the narrator that he has no family members or close ties besides his animals, while the narrator watches the other evacuees make their escape and





## SYMBOLS


Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

leave the old man behind. The evacuees crossing the bridge are like the cat who can look out for itself, blessed with the means to save themselves but blind to the needs of others. The old man cannot bear to think of what will happen to the animals who will not surely “be all right,” those “other” creatures less suited to survival than the cat. He belongs with the “others,” as he is too feeble to cross the great distance to safety and abandoned by people seeking to save themselves. The narrator “cannot think” of what will inevitably happen to the old man, either. Indeed, he keeps himself aloof from the old man, looking elsewhere while speaking to him and withholding genuine sympathy. If he allows himself to care about the old man and he still cannot save him, his feelings of sadness and anger at the senseless loss of human life may overwhelm him.

“This is not a good place to stop,” I said. “If you can make it, there are trucks up the road where it forks for Tortosa.”  
 “I will wait a while,” he said, “and then I will go. Where do the trucks go?”  
 “Towards Barcelona,” I told him.  
 “I know no one in that direction,” he said, “but thank you very much. Thank you again very much.”

**Related Characters:** The narrator, The Old Man (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator talks around the fact that the old man will be killed if he doesn't keep moving. Neither he nor the old man ever directly mention death, but it hangs heavily over the whole scene. The old man still wants to try to keep going, but he is discouraged to hear that the trucks would take him away to where he doesn't know anyone, which gestures to how important connecting with others is to him. With his animals gone, his hometown consumed by war, and no family or friends to take him in, the man seems to have lost his will to live. Here, the narrator gives him an option for survival, but the man seems only tepidly interested, since life without connection to others seems not to motivate him. He'll have a higher chance of survival if he can reach Barcelona, but he still won't have nearly the same quality of life that he did in San Carlos with his beloved animals, and

such an existence seems not worth fighting for. Nonetheless, he earnestly thanks the narrator for his advice. The old man appears to be grateful to the narrator for even stopping to talk to him, which no one else has done.

“He looked at me very blankly and tiredly, then said, having to share his worry with some one, “The cat will be all right. I am sure. . . But the others. Now what do you think about the others?”

“Why they'll probably come through it all right.”


“You think so?”

“Why not,” I said, watching the far bank where now there were no

carts.

**Related Characters:** The narrator, The Old Man (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

The old man attracts the reader's sympathy in this quote, which captures exactly how exhausted and lonely he feels. He does not know the narrator at all, but no one else can be bothered to talk to him, and he desperately needs “to share his worry with some one.” The narrator responds to the old man breezily, brushing off his concern. He is more preoccupied with the disappearance of the evacuees, which signals the coming danger and leaves him with no one to hand over the old man to. The old man is firmly the narrator's problem and his alone (if he chooses to intervene), and the fate of an old man too weak to move is as grim as the fate of simple-minded animals in the path of an artillery strike. Declaring that “they'll probably come through it all right” is falsely optimistic, and he says it in order to delude himself and the old man from the painful truth: anybody who is abandoned and can't fend for themselves in war will die.

“Did you leave the dove cage unlocked?” I asked.


“Yes.”

“Then they’ll fly.”

“Yes, certainly they’ll fly. But the others. It’s better not to think about the others,” he said.

**Related Characters:** The narrator, The Old Man (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 58


### Explanation and Analysis

The old man asks the narrator what he thinks will happen to the animals that aren’t as self-sufficient as a cat, and the narrator says that if the birds are free to fly away, they will fly to safety. The old man agrees, and says that it’s better not to speculate about the “others,” the other animals being the goats whom the narrator did not bring up. He also understands that their survival is doubtful, but he didn’t want to acknowledge it. The old man’s opinion that it’s better not to think about the doomed goats also applies to himself, doomed by his feebleness. Should the narrator put the man out of his mind as resolutely as the two of them turn their backs on the goats? His surprising reference to the “dove” cage after the old man had told him earlier that his birds were pigeons suggests that he unconsciously longs for the hope and peace that doves represent. The dove that Noah released after the flood flew back to him with a token of fertile land, evidence of God’s forgiveness and a promise of new life. In this case, however, the story does not end hopefully. The old man is condemned to death on Easter Sunday as soldiers and civilians alike act in contempt of religious lessons.

There was nothing to do about him. It was Easter Sunday and the Fascists were advancing toward the Ebro. It was a gray overcast day with a low ceiling so their planes were not up. That and the fact that cats know how to look after themselves was all the good luck that old man would ever have.

**Related Characters:** The narrator (speaker), The Old Man

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

These thoughts of the narrator conclude the story. In typical Hemingway style, meaning is conveyed starkly, with as little embellishment as possible, even in the final lines of a narrative where most other writers would prefer to end with a flourish. Frustratingly to the reader, the narrator doesn’t elaborate on any of the critical statements he makes just before the story ends. Can’t *something* be done for the poor old man? How does the narrator feel about the horrors of war sullyng such a holy day? His shortage of words indicates a great fatigue, a defeated withdrawal from the futile effort that is trying to justify any of the senselessness of war. It suggests a paralysis born of hopelessness and broken faith in a brutal world. Religion means nothing, because the army is coming to kill the old man and his animals on Easter Sunday. Innocence means nothing and compassion means nothing, because the old man will be killed even though he never involved himself in the war and spent his days caring for animals instead. Reflecting on cats in the final sentence shows that he did listen to some of the old man’s remarks, even if he didn’t react to them at the time. He evidently pities the innocent and helpless old man, even though blaming his fate entirely on poor “luck” is a delusion. Free will makes people responsible for the consequences of their actions, and many people’s willful negligence has left the old man to die.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## OLD MAN AT THE BRIDGE

An old man sits alongside a road, his clothes covered in dust. Nearby is a bridge over a river, which a mass of men, women, and children are crossing in trucks, carts, and on foot. Soldiers help push the carts up the banks. The old man sits, too tired to move. The narrator, a soldier, crosses the bridge in the other direction to see how far the enemy has advanced. By the time he gets back, most evacuees have made the crossing, but the old man hasn't moved.

The narrator approaches the old man, who says proudly that he has come from his native town of San Carlos—he smiles, because it “gave him pleasure to mention” his hometown. He was the last person to leave San Carlos because he was taking care of **animals** there (goats, pigeons, and a cat), but he eventually had to flee from the artillery aimed at the town. The narrator is distracted by watching the bridge and anticipating the approach of the enemy.

The narrator asks the old man if he has any family, and the old man says he does not have anybody, only the **animals**. He says that the cat will be alright because it can look out for itself, but he is worried about the others.

*Hemingway contrasts the crowd of people all moving forward together with the old man sitting still all by himself. He is clearly alienated from the rest of the evacuees. The soldiers are helping to keep the carts going, but they don't seem to be helping individual people. They maintain a degree of detachment from the desperate evacuees. The deadly war makes its approach known through the soldier's scouting and the people fleeing.*



*The narrator shows decent intentions by engaging the old man in conversation when everyone else has ignored him. However, his genuine engagement seems limited, as he is distracted from the man's story by anticipating the fighting to come. His aloofness strikes the reader as more regrettable because of how Hemingway humanizes the old man, who smiles when speaking of his hometown and bravely sought to protect his animals like a humble shepherd.*



*The old man confirms his lack of close social ties, revealing that he has only the animals to share his life with. While both he and the cat must be self-sufficient to survive, readers have more faith in the cat's fate than in the man's, as he is not making an effort to save himself. The man avoids speaking directly about death, but the intensity of his anxiety suggests that their deaths are on indeed on his mind.*





The narrator asks the old man what his political opinions are. The old man answers that he has “no politics,” and adds that he is seventy-six years old and has walked twelve kilometers. Now, he says, he can go no further. The narrator responds that this is not a good place to stop, and tells him that there are trucks up the road that can take him to Barcelona. The old man says that he does not know anyone in Barcelona, but he thanks the soldier anyway.

The old man can't help but share his concerns for his **animals** with the narrator. He repeats that the cat will surely be fine, but asks the narrator what he thinks about the fate of the other animals. The narrator, observing that all the other evacuees have gone ahead, answers “Why not.” The old man persists, asking if the narrator thinks the animals will be able to survive the artillery. The narrator asks if he unlocked the dove cage before he left. The old man says he did, and he agrees with the narrator that they'll fly. The old man says that “It's better not to think about the others.”

The narrator urges the old man to try to get up and walk. The old man manages to stand, but he cannot walk, so he sits back down. He says to himself, “I was only taking care of **animals.**” The narrator thinks that there is “nothing to do about him.”

*The narrator wants to know whether the old man has political affiliations, which would reveal his side in the war. The old man says he has “no politics,” which shows his alienation from the ideologies that so many other people feel so strongly about. The narrator's objection to the old man's statement that he can go no further leads readers to believe that death awaits if he stays where he is. Like the old man, the narrator does not directly mention death, but merely says that the old man shouldn't stop here. The old man remarks that he does not know anyone in Barcelona, illustrating that he is not thinking about immediate survival but rather about his future quality of life, now that he has been forcibly separated from his animals and the hometown he loved.*



*Hemingway further humanizes the old man by depicting his powerful longing for emotional connection as he describes his greatest fear to the narrator. However, the narrator spurns the old man's attempts to connect with him, conscious of the disappearance of the other evacuees, which erases the hope of finding another person to take over responsibility for the old man. Like the old man's birds, the evacuees have flown away, leaving the less agile creatures (like the goat) behind. The old man says that it's better not to think about what will become of the animals, implying that only terrible things will happen. The narrator has confused the old man's pigeons for doves, arguably revealing an unconscious idealism and a longing for peace. However, while the dove may have brought a miracle in the Bible, Hemingway's story promises no such salvation for his deeply flawed world. Instead of praying with humility or actively seeking a better outcome, the characters conclude that it's best to simply avoid thinking about the imminent tragedy, both for the animals and the old man himself.*



*The old man's fate is apparently sealed when he finds he cannot walk any further. He disengages from the narrator and voices his sense of great wrong to a deaf world. The narrator decides that, in this weakened and irrational state, the old man is beyond hope. Like the old man said about his animals, the narrator seems to think it's best not to concern himself about the man's fate.*



The narrator observes that it is Easter Sunday and the Fascists are advancing towards the Ebro River, but they cannot fly their planes with the heavy cloud cover. He concludes that the weather and the fact that the **cat** can take care of itself are “all the good luck that the old man would ever have.”

*The narrator's opponents are the most Catholic group in the Spanish Civil War, so the fact that they are advancing a violent campaign on Easter Sunday—a day celebrating Jesus's resurrection from a violent death—is deeply hypocritical. The narrator's own lack of mercy on this meaningful day is also ironic, as he refuses to acknowledge the same flaws in himself that he calls attention to in others. The enemy's delayed advance due to poor weather may grant the old man a temporary reprieve from death, and his beloved cat should be able to survive fine. Otherwise, his “luck” has completely run out. The narrator implies that mere chance controls whether people live or die, again refusing to acknowledge that his actions and the actions of others have directly created this fatal situation. Even on Easter, he does not imagine God will intervene on behalf of his shepherd—there is only random “luck.”*





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