Ernest Miller Hemingway (July 21, 1899 – July 2, 1961) was an American journalist, novelist, short-story writer, and sportsman. His economical and understated style—which he termed the iceberg theory—had a strong influence on 20th-century fiction, while his adventurous lifestyle and his public image brought him admiration from later generations. Hemingway produced most of his work between the mid-1920s and the mid-1950s, and he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. He published seven novels, six short-story collections, and two nonfiction works. Three of his novels, four short-story collections, and three nonfiction works were published posthumously. Many of his works are considered classics of American literature.

Hemingway was raised in Oak Park, Illinois. After high school, he was a reporter for a few months for The Kansas City Star before leaving for the Italian Front to enlist as an ambulance driver in World War I. In 1918, he was seriously wounded and returned home. His wartime experiences formed the basis for his novel A Farewell to Arms (1929).
In 1921, Hemingway married Hadley Richardson, the first of four wives. They moved to Paris where he worked as a foreign correspondent and fell under the influence of the modernist writers and artists of the 1920s' "Lost Generation" expatriate community. His debut novel The Sun Also Rises was published in 1926. He divorced Richardson in 1927 and married Pauline Pfeiffer; they divorced after he returned from the Spanish Civil War, where he had been a journalist. He based For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940) on his experience there. Martha Gellhorn became his third wife in 1940; they separated after he met Mary Welsh in London during World War II. He was present with the troops as a journalist at the Normandy landings and the liberation of Paris. Hemingway maintained permanent residences in Key West, Florida (in the 1930s) and Cuba (in the 1940s and 1950s). He almost died in 1954 after two plane crashes in as many days; these consecutive accidents left him in pain and ill health for much of the rest of his life. In 1959, he bought a house in Ketchum, Idaho, where, in mid-1961, he ended his own life.

THE TEXT

“The Old Man at the Bridge” by Ernest Hemingway. An old man with steel rimmed spectacles and very dusty clothes sat by the side of the road. There was a pontoon bridge across the river and carts, trucks, and men, women and children were crossing it. The mule- drawn carts staggered up the steep bank from the bridge with soldiers helping push against the spokes of the wheels. The trucks ground up and away heading out of it all and the peasants plodded along in the ankle deep dust. But the old man sat there without moving. He was too tired to go any farther.

It was my business to cross the bridge, explore the bridgehead beyond and find out to what point the enemy had advanced. I did this and returned over the bridge. There were not so many carts now and very few people on foot, but the old man was still there. "Where do you come from?" I asked him. "From San Carlos," he said, and smiled. That was his native town and so it gave him pleasure to mention it and he smiled. "I was taking care of animals," he explained. "Oh," I said, not quite understanding. "Yes," he said, "I stayed, you see, taking care of animals. I was the last one to leave the town of San Carlos." He did not look like a shepherd nor a herdsman and I looked at his black dusty clothes and his gray dusty face and his steel rimmed spectacles and said, "What animals were they?" "Various animals," he said, and shook his head. "I had to leave them." I was watching the bridge and the African looking country of the Ebro Delta and wondering how long now it would be before we would see the enemy, and listening all the while for the first noises that would signal that ever mysterious event
called contact, and the old man still sat there. "What animals were they?" I asked. "There were three animals altogether," he explained. "There were two goats and a cat and then there were four pairs of pigeons." And you had to leave them?" I asked. "Yes. Because of the artillery. The captain told me to go because of the artillery." "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." "What politics have you?" I asked. "I am without politics," he said. "I am seventy-six years old. I have come twelve kilometers now and I think now I can go no further." "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." He looked at me very blankly and tiredly, and then said, having to share his worry with someone, "The cat will be all right, I am sure. There is no need to be unquiet about the cat. 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. "But what will they do under the artillery when I was told to leave because of the artillery?" "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. "If you are rested I would go," I urged. "Get up and try to walk now." "Thank you," he said and got to his feet, swayed from side to side and then sat down backwards in the dust. "I was taking care of animals," he said dully, but no longer to me. "I was only taking care of animals." 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.

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.

Analysis

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.

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 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 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 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.

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 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.

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.”

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 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 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.”
THEMES

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.

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.

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.

Conclusion

“Old Man At The Bridge” is one of a great story written by Ernest Hemingway. The story was about an old man at the bridge during the war. The story was based on Hemingway’s experienced when he was a correspondent in the war. The old man was the reflection of the war victim who lost everything in his life as the effect of the war. Hemingway felt sorry for the old man and the people like him who had mentally broken by the civil war. That is why Hemingway portrays the devastating effects of war through this story.
A. Choose the correct answer from the given option:

1. What was the old man doing in his native town?
   a. taking care of animals
   b. begging on the streets
   c. helping the soldiers
   d. talking care of children

2. What is special about the day the narrator encounters the old man?
   a. It is Easter Sunday.
   b. It is the last day of the war.
   c. It is Thanksgiving.
   d. It is Christmas Day.

3. Why does the old man leave the animals?
   a. because the children are taking care of them
   b. because he loses interest
   c. because they all die
   d. because of the artillery

4. Which animal is the old man least concerned about?
   a. the goats
   b. the pigeons
   c. the cat
   d. the dog

5. The trucks are crossing the bridge and going where?
   a. Vera Cruz
   b. Barcelona
   c. San Carlos
   d. Tortosa

6. What is the old man's native town?
   a. Vera Cruz
   b. Ebro Delta
   c. Barcelona
   d. San Carlos

7. What is the narrator's job?
   a. He questions people before they cross the bridge.
   b. He protects the people who cross the bridge.
c. He scouts ahead for the enemy's location.
d. He stops people from crossing the bridge.

8. Why does the old man stop and not go across the bridge?
   a. He is asked not to cross the bridge.
   b. He doesn't need to cross the bridge.
   c. He is too tired to cross the bridge.
   d. He isn't interested in crossing the bridge.

9. The old man is a symbol of what?
   a. the causes of war
   b. the patience of the soldiers
   c. the civilian victims of war
   d. the apathy of the civilians

10. How old is the old man?
    a. ninety-four
    b. sixty-six
    c. eighty-four
    d. seventy-six

B. Answer the following questions on your own:
1. Explain why the narrator takes so much time to converse with the old man. Use details from the story to support your answer.
2. What statements from the story suggest that the old man is about to give up on life? Quote specific statements to back your answer.
3. How is the narrator portrayed in the story? How does he treat the old man? Give examples from the story to back your answer.
4. How does Hemmingway show that war is disrupting the lives of the peasants? Is this portrayal realistic? Why or why not?
5. What is the setting of the story? Give details from the story to support your answer.
6. What kind of life has the old man been leading? What keeps him going? Use details from the story to support your answer.

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Dated: 12/05/2020