

OLD MAN AT THE BRIDGE

The short story **Old Man at the Bridge** by Ernest Hemingway wholly demonstrates the vicious repercussions of war on disinterested innocents. The short story, narrated by a nameless soldier, sensitively portrays the sorry plight of the refugees who are displaced by war. The action takes place at a pontoon bridge near the Ebro Delta on an Easter Sunday during the Spanish Civil War. All the refugees of that area were crossing the bridge to protect themselves from the impending attack by the enemy troops. The young soldier was on a mission to cross the bridge and find out how far the enemy had advanced.

After the soldier had scanned the region for any sign of the enemy troops, he noticed an old man still sitting at the pontoon bridge. The seventy-six-year-old man wore black dusty clothes and his face was dusty grey. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles which suggested that he was neither a shepherd nor a herdsman. He appeared weak and exhausted. The soldier asked the old man where he came from. The old man replied that he was from Sans Carlos. He had already walked about 12 kilometres from his hometown, San Carlos, and was weary and exhausted. Therefore, even after the soldier had advised him to flee, the old man did not move.

The officer asked the old man about his political loyalty and he replied that had no politics. In San Carlos, he owned two goats, a cat and some pigeons which he had to leave behind because of the artillery. His whole life revolved around his animals and his hometown. He was just taking care of his animals without harming anybody just like any other ordinary individual unconcerned with the ongoing war. When he was told to move to safety in view of the advancing enemy troops, he was worried about the safety of his animals and wanted to remain with them.

The old man is more concerned for the safety of his animals than for his own safety. The animals stand for different qualities. The pigeons, for example, represent peace and harmony and the fact that they fly away, away from the war, maybe is a reference to the refugees who flee from the war to a safer place. The cat being a symbol of independence, does not need anybody to survive, but the goat is often used as a sacrificial animal and this probably represents the old man and his situation. Like a goat which is sacrificed, the old man's fate is sealed. The old man's obsession with the safety of his animals brings out Hemingway's point that this mad war unnecessarily destroys even such useful human beings who help to sustain life. The narrator, the young soldier, advised the old man to cross the pontoon bridge to save himself from the impending assault of the advancing enemies.

Although the old man got up and tried to move, he

swayed and teetered. So, he sat down again in the dust as he was too tired to move. He finally resigned himself to his fate and the imminent doom.

We, along with the young soldier, arrive at the painful realisation that the old man will not be able to move on and will probably die at the bridge. The irony is that like a goat which is sacrificed, the old man`s fate is sealed on an Easter Sunday, a day of hope and faith.

Neither the old peasant nor the war is identified by name in the story, for the idea of the tragic sacrifices of uninvolved men in every war is universal. The old man epitomises the victims of war- men, women and children who had to leave their home and their normal life as victims of a war with which they have nothing to do.