

2 Read

As you read this short story, take note of the annotations that model ways to closely read the text.

Reading Model

“Old Man at the Bridge” by Ernest Hemingway

An old man¹ with steel rimmed spectacles² and very dusty clothes sat by the side of the road. There was a pontoon bridge³ 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 soldiers³ 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.² But the old man sat there without moving. He was too tired to go any farther.

It was my business⁴ 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.⁵

“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.”⁵

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.⁶

“What animals were they?” I asked.

3 “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.”

Key Ideas and Details

1 The “old man” of the title is mentioned in the story’s first sentence. The pronoun *an* suggests that the narrator does not know exactly who the old man is.

Craft and Structure

2 Hemingway’s language is simple but poetic. The consonant sounds in the phrases *steel rimmed spectacles* and *peasants plodded along in the ankle deep dust* create strong rhythmic patterns and also convey vivid images.

Key Ideas and Details

3 You might consult a dictionary to determine that a *pontoon bridge* is a temporary floating bridge that is used by the military. The narrator also mentions *soldiers*, which may help you infer that the story takes place during wartime.

Craft and Structure

4 This phrase “It was my business” reveals that the narrator is telling the story in the first person. Further details in this sentence reveal the narrator’s task.

Key Ideas and Details

5 The old man’s smile and his words show that he was happy in San Carlos and did not want to leave. This fact might help you determine why he sits still while everyone around him is moving away.

Craft and Structure

6 This long sentence creates tension and reveals a conflict—the narrator expects that danger is approaching, but the old man will not move to safety.