The Most Dangerous Game

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD CONNELL

Richard Connell was born in 1893 to parents Richard and Mary Connell. His father, a successful man in many fields, was an editor, reporter, political advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt, and congressman. Following in his father's footsteps, Connell took up writing fairly young, covering baseball games for his father's former employer, *The Poughkeepsie Press*, by the age of 10. Enrolling at Harvard University in 1912, he continued writing and eventually became editorial chairman of *The Crimson* and president of the *Harvard Lampoon*. During WWI, Connell enlisted and served in the U.S. Army. He returned home after the war to an advertising career and married a colleague, Louise Fox, in 1919. Connell and his wife traveled abroad for a few years before returning stateside, and he left advertising for a freelance writing career. He wrote numerous novels and award-winning short stories, including "The Most Dangerous Game," his best-known work and winner of the O. Henry Memorial Award. Encouraged by his modest writing success, Connell moved to Hollywood to pursue screenwriting, and two of his screenplays, *Meet John Doe* and *Two Girls and a Sailor*, received Academy Award nominations. In 1949, he died of a heart attack in Beverly Hills at the age of 56. "The Most Dangerous Game" remains one of the most regularly anthologized short stories.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like other writers of the Modernist period, Connell's work was largely influenced by his experiences in WWI and as a survivor of the Lost Generation, referring to the masses of young people who experienced the war and were either killed or came of age during a period of great upheaval. Especially because he fought on the front lines in Europe, Connell witnessed firsthand humanity's capacity for destruction and cruelty. This era saw the world torn apart twice with widespread warfare, so intellectuals and artists of the time analyzed assumptions about civilization, investigated humanity's innate brutality, and searched for human connections in times of personal and political division. Works of this time also evaluated the effects of industry and technology on society. Though the Industrial Revolution (18th-19th centuries) provided enormous technological advancements, that progress came at a significant human cost with extreme working conditions, heightened pollution, and further socioeconomic divides. Writers, artists, and social theorists in the postindustrial world questioned assumptions that technology elevated civilization when that technology was made possible by exploiting human beings and their labor.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Most work of the Modernist Era—a literary period between the late 19th and early 20th centuries marked by the two World Wars—comprised themes of isolationism, self-reflection, and consciousness, and raised questions about human rationality. The major writers of the period, including James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and William Faulkner, broke from traditional writing conventions of the Romantic and Victorian periods in favor of stylistic exploration and more "realistic" subject matter. "The Most Dangerous Game," like other modernist works, examines humanity's inner workings with a realistic and even pessimistic tone. "The Most Dangerous Game" also has clear roots in the adventure story tradition of *Robinson Crusoe* with its themes of survival on a remote island, and the story's dark, ominous atmosphere harkens to the Gothic period and Edgar Allan Poe's short stories. Additionally, the narrator mentions near the end of the story Zaroff's affinity for reading classical philosophy, specifically Marcus Aurelius. Considered the last of the great Roman emperors, Aurelius' most famous work is *Meditations*, a piece of stoic philosophy warning against material indulgences and emphasizing strong ethical principles. Zaroff, ironically, is the opposite of the ideal stoic, and the reference may have been a comment on materialism and weakened ethical resolve in the early 20th century. "The Most Dangerous Game" has influenced numerous later stories, including "Seventh Victim," *The Running Man*, and *The Hunger Games*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Most Dangerous Game, or The Hounds of Zaroff
- **Where Written:** Westport, Connecticut
- **When Published:** 1924
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story, adventure
- **Setting:** A remote island in the Caribbean Sea
- **Climax:** After eluding the murderous General Zaroff in the jungle, Sanger Rainsford kills the general in his mansion.
- **Antagonist:** General Zaroff
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Item1. "The Most Dangerous Game" was also published in *Collier's Weekly* under the name "The Hounds of Zaroff,"

possibly a reference to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Item2. Richard Connell's first job after graduating college was as a homicide reporter for the *New York American*.

PLOT SUMMARY

On an especially dark night, Sanger Rainsford and his friend Whitney are sailing on a yacht heading to the Amazon to hunt jaguars. Whitney explains to Rainsford the superstition surrounding an ominous place they are passing called **Ship-Trap Island**. Between remarks about the island, the two men argue about whether animals experience thoughts and feelings, and Rainsford concludes that animals understand nothing and that living creatures are divided into hunters and prey.

Later that night, Rainsford hears gunshots in the distance and falls overboard while trying to investigate. He swims to the mysterious island, and the next morning, he finds **blood**-stained weeds and signs of a hunter, indicating that the island is inhabited. Walking along the jungle's edge, he unexpectedly comes upon an enormous **mansion**. Rainsford knocks on the front door and meets a huge man armed with a pistol. An older, very elegant man appears and introduces himself as General Zaroff and the large man as Ivan, his servant who is deaf and mute. Zaroff recognizes Rainsford's name and welcomes the celebrated hunter into his home.

Over an elaborate dinner, Rainsford and Zaroff bond over their love of hunting. Zaroff explains how integral hunting is to his identity, but says it became dull because it was too easy, so he "invented" a new animal to hunt. After Rainsford presses him, Zaroff explains that he prefers to hunt humans, because unlike animals, humans can reason and are therefore more dangerous and exciting to hunt. Shocked, Rainsford insists that Zaroff is committing murder and refuses his invitation to participate in the manhunt.

Still trying to win over Rainsford, Zaroff explains the game. He gives his "prey" hunting clothes, a supply of food, a hunting knife, and a three-hour head start. He follows with a small pistol, and if the hunted man eludes the general for three days, he wins. The man can choose to participate in his game or be handed over to Ivan, a professional torturer. Disgusted, Rainsford excuses himself for the evening, and Zaroff leaves for his nightly hunt.

The next day, Rainsford demands to leave the island immediately, but Zaroff insists they will hunt that night. Rainsford refuses to hunt, but eventually concedes when Zaroff gives him the choice between being hunted or being given to Ivan. Zaroff leaves for a nap, and Rainsford races off into the jungle.

Despite Rainsford's three-hour lead and efforts to cover his trail, Zaroff finds his hiding spot almost at once, but then immediately leaves. Rainsford realizes that Zaroff is toying with him, and experiences true terror for the first time in his life. Running further into the jungle, Rainsford stops to craft a trap out of a dead tree and succeeds in injuring Zaroff and buying himself more time.

Plodding on through the night, Rainsford accidently steps into quicksand. The soft ground inspires him to make a large pit with pointed sticks at the bottom, but the trap only claims a hunting dog. Zaroff goes home to rest, promising to return with the whole pack of hunting dogs.

At daybreak, Rainsford wakes to the sound of baying dogs and sees Zaroff and Ivan drawing nearer. He quickly creates another trap and then runs, understanding now how a hunted animal feels. Looking back, he sees that Zaroff remains standing, but the booby-trap has apparently killed Ivan. Reaching the edge of the jungle, Rainsford sees the mansion across the cove and jumps into the water. Zaroff returns home, thinking Rainsford jumped to this death.

While eating dinner that evening, Zaroff feels annoyed about having to replace Ivan and that Rainsford didn't stick around to fight or be killed. After locking his bedroom door for the night, Zaroff turns to see Rainsford standing next to his bed. Zaroff demands to know how Rainsford got there. Rainsford says he swam. Zaroff congratulates Rainsford on winning the game, but Rainsford refuses the victory and tells Zaroff to ready himself. The story closes with Rainsford deciding that he had never slept in a better bed.

CHARACTERS

Sanger Rainsford – Sanger Rainsford is a celebrated hunter from New York City with a passion for hunting big game and a "predator versus prey" worldview. He is traveling on a yacht with his friend Whitney to hunt jaguars in the Amazon, when he falls overboard into the sea just off the coast of **Ship-Trap Island**. After he swims ashore, he comes across General Zaroff's enormous **mansion** on the island and soon learns that he has entered the trap of a sadistic serial killer. Although both men enjoy hunting animals, Rainsford draws a hard line at hunting humans. Given the choice between being Zaroff's latest prey or Ivan's torture victim, Rainsford takes to the jungle and attempts to outwit Zaroff for the three-day contest. While running from Zaroff, Rainsford realizes how hunted animals must feel and experiences true terror for the first time in his life—though, instead of inspiring thoughts about the sanctity of all life, his terror motivates him to respond with violence. Although he resisted the game at first, when forced to fight for his survival, Rainsford eventually kills both Ivan and Zaroff, winning "the most dangerous game" and crossing the ethical line he drew at the beginning of the story. Rainsford's

transformation from proud hunter to terrified prey and then to cold-blooded murderer reveals that mankind is not so different from animals, and without the social contracts of a community, men will resort to brutal violence.

General Zaroff – General Zaroff is an extremely wealthy Russian aristocrat who inhabits **Ship-Trap Island** with his servant, Ivan, and hunts other men, who are, in his words, "the most dangerous game" because of their capacity for reasoning. Zaroff represents the wealthy elite and lives in a **mansion** with the finest furnishings, dining, and apparel, but the reader quickly learns that his showy exterior barely hides his predatory nature. When Rainsford stumbles up to his front door, he and Zaroff bond over their love of hunting until Zaroff reveals his passion for hunting humans. He justifies his actions by touting social Darwinist rhetoric that he, a superior man, is entitled to take the lives of the weak. After Rainsford rejects his offer to hunt together, he makes Rainsford his latest prey. Using hunting dogs, the finest equipment, and his extensive knowledge of his own island, Zaroff thinks he has created an unlosable game for himself, only to be defeated when Rainsford outsmarts and kills him in his own house. His reliance on his abundant resources and weakened prey reveal Zaroff, for all of his talk of hunting prowess, to be cowardly. He never enters a fair fight, but uses his dominance over socially, materially, and physically disadvantaged men to affirm his own superiority.

Ivan – Ivan is General Zaroff's servant, a fellow Cossack, and lives with him on the **island**. He is the first person Rainsford meets when he knocks on Zaroff's front door. Ivan is an extremely large, powerful looking man, and he is deaf and mute. Zaroff employs him to assist in the manhunts and to intimidate those who resist being hunted with threats of torture, as Ivan was previously a professional torturer for the Russian Czar. Near the end of the story, the reader can assume that Rainsford kills Ivan with a knife booby-trap. Both the narrator and Zaroff's treatment of Ivan throughout the story indicate that neither viewed Ivan, a disabled man, as fully human but instead more akin to a large guard dog. He is often described in a way that lumps him in with the hunting dogs, and he dies while leading their leashes. After he dies, Zaroff is irritated at the inconvenience of being without a bodyguard rather than grieved for the human loss.

Whitney – Whitney is a friend and hunting companion of Rainsford's who first introduces him and the reader to **Ship-Trap Island** and its ominous reputation as an evil place. Whitney argues with Rainsford about whether animals are capable of thought and feeling, thereby allowing the reader insight to Rainsford's predator vs. prey worldview.

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.

CIVILIZATION AND COMMUNITY

As the story of an aristocrat who hunts the shipwrecked men that wash ashore on his private island, "The Most Dangerous Game" challenges the idea that highbrow pastimes and aristocratic society are synonymous with being civilized or moral. The term "civilized" usually refers to highly-developed culture and refined behavior, as well as an ability to live in peaceful communities, but the aristocrat Zaroff does not meet this definition—despite his refinement and social position, General Zaroff has an innate tendency towards brutal, uncivilized violence. This tendency suggests that cultural refinement alone does not make a person "civilized." Through Zaroff's—and later, Rainsford's—actions on the remote **island**, Connell suggests that the fragile bonds of community can keep people from violence, but once exposed to certain behaviors or situations even civilized people often descend into brutality.

Most of Connell's short story takes place in a remote, ominous place away from "civilization." Despite Zaroff's claims to have brought civilization to a wild island, the reader quickly learns that the story's most monstrous creature dwells not in the jungle, but rather in the **mansion**, strutting around in gentleman's tweed. After confessing his enthusiasm for hunting people, Zaroff explains to Rainsford how he replenishes his island with human prey by tricking passing ships into steering towards a rocky trap. As he describes his intricate and barbarous plan, he then adds—unprovoked, in response to nothing—"Oh, yes...I have electricity. We try to be civilized here." This comment clearly parodies of the notion of being "civilized," as he has just admitted to his routine cruel violence towards other human beings.

Zaroff also tries to seem "civilized" by regularly demonstrating his upper-class education. He knows French, Russian, and English, and he hums bits of *Madame Butterfly* and reads Marcus Aurelius for leisure. However, his actions demonstrate he does not truly understand those works. *Madame Butterfly* warns against the human cost of self-serving behavior, and Marcus Aurelius is perhaps best known for *Meditations*, a work of stoic philosophy that emphasizes avoiding material indulgences and maintaining strong ethical principles. While "civilization" is typically marked by a blend of refined culture, empathy for others, and ethical principles, Zaroff shows that he has only the trappings of civilization, but not the underlying humanity.

Zaroff lives on a remote island with only his servant Ivan, presumably some house staff, and his occasional prisoners. In

many ways, he exists as an island himself. He tethers himself to no one, experiencing no human bonds. Even his most loyal servant, Ivan, he keeps at an arm's distance much like his hunting dogs. Ivan's role is more akin to a giant guard dog; he follows orders, intimidates prisoners, and hunts holding the leash of Zaroff's dogs, grouping him together with them in the reader's mind. When Rainsford's trap kills Ivan, Zaroff feels annoyed at having to replace him, not grieved over the human loss. He expresses more sadness at losing his favorite hunting dog, Lazarus, than Ivan.

During their initial meeting, Rainsford observes that Zaroff's "smile showed **red** lips and pointed teeth," the first clue that Zaroff is a loosely veiled predator who views other men not as people, but as prey. Though he feels disgusted with Zaroff's behavior at first, as Rainsford becomes immersed in the island, a place void of civilized community, he also resorts to violence. At the end of the story, Rainsford stands face-to-face with Zaroff for the final fight, not in the jungle but in Zaroff's mansion. In an environment that serves as a testament to human achievement, the two men share the singular goal of ending the life in front of them, reflecting to each other and the reader the innate brutality of men without community—and perhaps at the heart of all men.

Rainsford's role as a flawed hero demonstrates that it doesn't take long for the fragile bonds of community to crumble, and without them, Connell suggests, men will devolve into violence. Through Connell's exploration of human nature, the reader finds that true civilization requires empathy and a sense of community, and the lack of those qualities can reduce a man, however well-educated and wealthy, to the most basic of predatory animals.

CONDONED VIOLENCE VS. MURDER

Both Zaroff and Rainsford are former military men and avid hunters—in other words, they participate in socially-condoned killing. But Zaroff also participates in a kind of killing that is not socially accepted—hunting human beings for sport—the central plot point of "The Most Dangerous Game." Zaroff insists that his actions are justified, and that he has been liberated from the silly "Victorian" sentiments about human life to which Rainsford remains captive. Rainsford, however (and, presumably, the reader), draws a hard line against killing other human beings for sport. While the reader might at first identify morally with Rainsford, by the end of the story, Rainsford has taken two more human lives. The moral complexity of these killings demonstrates that the line between socially acceptable violence (hunting, warfare, self-defense) and murder is blurry.

Both Rainsford and Zaroff approve of killing in some circumstances: they are avid, skilled hunters, and they both served in the military, which required them to kill other people. In these contexts, Connell demonstrates that killing is not just socially accepted, but also honorable or even fashionable. For example, when explaining his upbringing, Zaroff mentions his time as an officer in the Russian military, something "expected of noblemen's sons." Therefore, wartime violence was a social expectation and an indication of Zaroff's noble class status, or his "civilized" background. Furthermore, Zaroff displays his hunting trophies (animal heads) in his dining hall and throughout his house, which shows that these relics of killing are socially fashionable, making Zaroff appear, paradoxically, more civilized to others.

While both of these aspects of Zaroff seem relatively normal to Rainsford, Zaroff and Rainsford do not draw the same boundary between acceptable and unacceptable killing. "Thank you, I'm a hunter, not a murderer," Rainsford says in response to Zaroff's invitation to join the manhunt, indicating Rainsford's strong feelings about the distinction between violence against people and animals. However, Connell suggests several times that this boundary is more porous than "civilized" people might like to think. Refuting Rainsford's moral prohibition against killing humans in peacetime, Zaroff suggests that the line between wartime and peacetime killing isn't actually significant; surely Rainsford's experiences in the war must have cured him of "romantic ideas about the value of human life," Zaroff says, hinting that his own experience of war is what blurred this boundary in him. Moreover, after Zaroff explains the hunt, he invites his guest to see his "new collection of heads" in the library. Readers are left to wonder whether these are human or animal heads, and with this ambiguity Connell has taken a fashionable habit and shown that it was always grotesque and brutal.

While Zaroff is unquestionably a serial murderer, Connell is less clear about Rainsford. By the end of the story, Rainsford has taken two human lives: Ivan's and Zaroff's (in addition to whoever he might have killed in the war). Rainsford killed Ivan in self-defense, and one could argue that he killed Zaroff in self-defense, too—even though Rainsford had "won the game" (hypothetically ensuring his own safety), it's reasonable to conclude that Zaroff would have to die for Rainsford to be truly safe on the island. However, in the moment of his death, Zaroff was not threatening Rainsford, they were not at war, and they were not hunting animals—so the story's final killing seems to suggest, in itself, that the hard line Rainsford tried to draw between acceptable and unacceptable killing was never as clear as he thought.

EXTREME SOCIAL DARWINISM

Zaroff personifies the social Darwinist extremism that plagued much of the early 20th century. Social Darwinism is a term used to describe the ideologies that became popular in the late 19th century applying Charles Darwin's theories of natural selection to human society. These ideas quickly escalated into extremism when societies and

governments, following British philosopher Howard Spencer's phrase "survival of the fittest," started labeling certain humans as socially unfit (usually racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities, among others) and treating them as subhuman. Social Darwinist extremism led to eugenics programs across Europe and the U.S. in which procreation was encouraged in socially "fit" people (usually white, able-bodied, and middle-to-upper class), and the "unfit" were sterilized by force and/or in secret. Sometimes, the socially unfit were rounded up and killed. These extreme social views eventually culminated in the Holocaust with Nazi Germany's mass genocide of Jews, racial minorities, Romani people, the disabled, and homosexuals. In "The Most Dangerous Game," Connell explores extreme social Darwinism on a small scale on **Ship-Trap Island**.

Zaroff seems to embody the philosophy of social Darwinism, as he attempts to justify his hunting of men by stating, "Life is for the strong, to be lived by the strong, and, if needs be, taken by the strong. The weak of the world were put here to give the strong pleasure. I am strong. Why should I not use my gift?" He believes, in other words, that ethics are moot and human life is no more sacred than anything else in the natural world—all that matters to him is strength, and therefore strength is a justification for any behavior. As a well-educated, wealthy aristocrat, Zaroff believes himself to be of the highest caliber of natural existence, and because of this, Zaroff feels justified in hunting those he sees as less fit, be they human or animal. Rainsford seems to disagree, but by playing the game, he arguably becomes implicated in these extreme ideas as well—and Connell suggests that he may have already been complicit even before coming to the island.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some European countries and the U.S. participated to varying degrees in eugenics programs to rid their societies of the physically and mentally "unfit." Government agencies framed these actions not as murder or human rights violations, but as a duty performed for the betterment of humanity, strengthening the human race by making sure only the fit survived. Zaroff, a Russian and man of European taste and elegance, embodies the logic of such programs. He claims that the people he hunts aren't fully human anyway, saying, "I hunt the scum of the earth: sailors from tramp ships—lassars, blacks, Chinese, whites, mongrels—a thoroughbred horse or hound is worth more than a score of them." To him, the killing isn't murder because those he hunts are already socially marked as unfit. This logic lays bare the moral emptiness of eugenics and social Darwinism. Unlike government eugenics programs, Zaroff has no need for the pretense that he's making the world a better place through his actions; he's honest about the fact that he kills others because strength is his guiding principle, not morality.

From Zaroff's game, it's also clear how the logic of social Darwinism can easily become an excuse to dehumanize marginalized peoples (as it has been throughout history). Instead of proclaiming outright hatred for others, proponents of social Darwinism can simply say that those too weak to survive can be justifiably eradicated. This logic is even more perverse considering that Zaroff's victims, like many marginalized peoples, are not given a fair chance. Zaroff has years and years of experience hunting and killing, he is fully armed, and the game is played at his home, an island he knows intimately. His prey—who are often weakened when they wash ashore—are simply given a three-hour head start. While Zaroff believes that anyone he is able to kill is necessarily weaker than he is (therefore justifying their death), the terms of the game are clearly rigged in his favor, much like the way society fosters and protects dominant groups while blaming those without resources for their difficult lives.

Connell complicates the story's ethical lines, however, when he implicates Rainsford in these ideas by having him kill to survive, and essentially taking Zaroff's place at the end of the story. The first person the reader can assume Rainsford kills is Ivan, but this killing is quickly glossed over. For the entirety of the story, Connell describes Ivan as more beastlike than human—the reader is first introduced to Ivan as "a gigantic creature" who is deaf, mute, and like all of the Cossack "race," according to Zaroff, something of a "savage." The reader isn't given time to consider the ethics of Ivan's murder because he, a brutish and disabled man, was never presented as fully human either. Intentionally or not, here Connell also calls into question societies (and readers) that may condemn eugenics programs but still participate in social Darwinist ideology by placing less value in the lives of marginalized people. Further, by the end of the text, the reader must reevaluate if there is any hero in this story at all, and consider that perhaps Rainsford is something of a villain as well. Rainsford rid the world of serial killer by being the better killer. Because Rainsford succeeds only *within* the survival-of-the-fittest system, and ends up sleeping in Zaroff's bed, seemingly taking his place, the reader must ask whether the story actually challenges the ideology of social Darwinism, upholds it, or pessimistically suggests that though morally empty, it is simply the way the world works.

SYMBOLS

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

BLOOD AND THE COLOR RED

In "The Most Dangerous Game," references to blood and red imagery are used as a warning of coming dangers and to reinforce an atmosphere of violence and death. When Rainsford is thrown overboard into the Caribbean Sea, Connell describes the water as "blood-warm,"

signaling that Rainsford's life is at risk both in that moment and in ways he has yet to discover. After he makes it safely to shore and rests, he discovers a place in the weeds "stained crimson," and this his first visual indication that death has occurred on the **island**, though he assumes it was an animal's death. Later, the reader discovers that General Zaroff hunts men, and so the blood Rainsford saw was likely from a human. With this imagery, Connell blurs the lines between predator and prey, hunter and hunted, reminding the reader that (in most cases) they both bleed red. Connell also uses red details to hint at General Zaroff's predatory nature, describing his lips as red and explaining that his soup, called borscht and made from beets, is a dark red color. As an avid hunter of both beast and man, Zaroff consumes violence and death for sport and literal nourishment.

THE ISLAND

Ship-Trap Island hosts both a twisted jungle and a palatial **mansion**, untamed wilderness set against an edifice of noble civilization, but Connell uses the story's events on the island to reveal those boundaries as arbitrary. After reaching the island's shores, Rainsford experiences a false sense of security knowing from the gunshot sounds, bullet cartridge, and hunting boot print that the island is inhabited by men. He views the traces of mankind's technology as a sign of salvation, and avoids trekking through the jungle, thinking he will be safe once he reaches the mansion. What he finds is just the opposite—the mansion is the most dangerous place on the island, and Rainsford soon learns that he must conquer all spaces of the island, both the jungle and the mansion, in order to survive. Indeed, he finally defeats Zaroff only by breaking in to the mansion and hiding in his bedroom. Thus the island as a whole acts as a kind of microcosm for the world, in which both wild places and supposedly "civilized" places can be sites of danger and human cruelty.

The island also serves as a metaphor for General Zaroff himself. A mixture of cruel violence cloaked within the external trappings of civilization, Zaroff intentionally lives in seclusion away from society and its ethical expectations. Like most psychopaths, he lacks empathy, and without that human connection, he exists as an island encircled by but distinctly apart from humanity. He literally isolates himself from others on the island, but even when he does interact with other humans he is disconnected from them because of his cruelty.

ZAROFF'S MANSION

Set in contrast with the gnarled jungle on a remote **island**, General Zaroff's mansion represents a superficial façade of civilization. A washed-up sailor might expect to find wilderness on a remote island, but finding an enormous house would be quite the shock, which is likely why Rainsford initially assumed the house was a mirage. As many people would, Rainsford assumes his salvation lies in the house as a symbol of civilization and protection against the wilderness. Within its glamorous walls, however, Zaroff and Ivan imprison, torture, and murder unfortunate shipwrecked visitors. After eluding Zaroff's murderous efforts in the jungle, Rainsford surprises and kills him in his own bedroom. By making the mansion the residence for the story's barbarous villain and the site of the final killing, Connell shows the reader that brutal violence can occur even in the most elegant spaces. The mansion functions as a criticism of Western society's focus on material wealth as an indication of advanced civilization as opposed to people's behavior, morality, and commitment to shared community. In other words, it isn't the elaborate structures that define a civilization, but rather the actions of the people who live within them.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Waking Lion Press edition of *The Most Dangerous Game: and Other Stories of Menace and Adventure* published in 2010.

The Most Dangerous Game Quotes

"The old charts call it 'Ship-Trap Island'[…] A suggestive name, isn't it? Sailors have a curious dread of the place. I don't know why. Some superstition—"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Whitney introduces Ship-Trap Island to Rainsford and the reader in one of the first sentences of the story, indicating its significance in the narrative as a setting and a symbol. Whitney explicitly points out the island's ominous name, making sure the reader takes note that it is a dangerous place for sea-farers like Whitney and Rainsford. With this introduction, Connell is also establishing a dark, mysterious atmosphere, similar to that of a Gothic story where the setting almost has a life of its own. The mystery surrounding the island draws the reader into the story and suggests that the sailors' dread of the place largely stems from humans' innate fear of the unknown. No one can say why exactly the place seems evil, but they fear it anyway.

"Who cares how a jaguar feels?"

"Perhaps the jaguar does," observed Whitney.

"Bah! They've no understanding."

"Even so, I rather think they understand one thing—fear. The fear of pain and the fear of death."

"Nonsense," laughed Rainsford. "This hot weather is making you soft, Whitney. Be a realist. The world is made up of two classes—the hunters and the huntees. Luckily, you and I are hunters."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1-2

Explanation and Analysis

Sailing toward the Amazon on a luxurious yacht, Rainsford and Whitney have a conversation that provides some insight into the moral compass of these hunting enthusiasts. Both clearly love the sport, but Whitney brings up ethical questions about animals' experiences and feelings. Considering that he is on his way to hunt more big game, these thoughts haven't prevented him from continuing to enjoy the sport, but he at least is entertaining thoughts about the ethical implications of killing animals. Rainsford, on the other hand, firmly rejects notions about animal feelings, saying those kinds of thoughts are for the "soft" and not hardened hunters like Whitney and himself.

Additionally, Rainsford declares his worldview that living creatures are divided into predators and prey, and he and Whitney, as human men, exist in the dominant category of predator. This declaration establishes Rainsford's ethical guidelines concerning killing, which in condoned activities such as the sport of hunting is something not only socially acceptable but well within the natural order of things.

"Where there are pistol shots, there are men. Where there are men, there is food," he thought. But what kind of men, he wondered, in so forbidding a place?

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Rainsford has made it safely to the island's shore and has discovered blood-soaked grass and a bullet cartridge, indicating the island is inhabited. Like any shipwrecked sailor would, he assumes that his salvation lies with finding other people. Equating pistol shots with the presence of men demonstrates how intertwined weapons, violence, and human civilization are, and while Rainsford is hopeful about finding people—and with them, food—he also wonders about the nature of those people. However, his caution stems not from finding blood and a bullet shell, but from the wild jungle he assumes these men inhabit. In other words, it's still the unknown island that scares him, not the familiar weapon and signs of death.

Bleak darkness was blacking out the sea and jungle when Rainsford sighted the lights. He came upon them as he turned a crook in the coast line; and his first thought was that he had come upon a village, for there were many lights. But as he forged along he saw to his great astonishment that all the lights were in one enormous building—a lofty structure with pointed towers plunging upward into the gloom. His eyes made out the shadowy outlines of a palatial chateau; it was set on a high bluff, and on three sides of it cliffs dived down to where the sea licked greedy lips in the shadows.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The imagery used to describe the mansion implies that this structure stands against the wilderness keeping the jungle and the sea at bay. The pointed towers hold their inhabitants high above the jungle and the walls provide a shield from the sea's "greedy lips." The lights from the mansion beckon to Rainsford as a sign of safety from the island's darkness. Where he expected to find a native village, Rainsford instead finds a European-style estate, as the word "chateau" implies. This edifice of European civilization stands in contrast to the untamed Caribbean jungle.

Though the giant house at first signals safety, a closer look at the language used to describe it suggest that there might be something sinister lurking behind the impressive exterior. The pointed towers plunge "upward into the gloom" and three of its sides are sharp cliffs. These details sound like features a prison would have. This characterization suggests that perhaps the estate keeps inhabitants in just as much as—if not more than—it keeps the surrounding wilderness out.

> "I have but one passion in my life, Mr. Rainsford, and it is the hunt."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

As he and Rainsford share an impressive dinner and bond over their mutual enjoyment for hunting, Zaroff explains that his love for hunting goes beyond just a hobby; it is the reason for his existence. Hunting is a socially acceptable pastime, even considered an aristocratic and noble one, but to declare that one's life purpose is to destroy other life suggests breaking from social convention into an extreme sort of violence. Furthermore, in his attempt to prepare his guest for his preferred kind of hunting, Zaroff romanticizes his affinity for the hunt by calling it his life's "passion." Interestingly, that sort of romantic language is often tied in with violence, as in phrases like "a crime of passion," and suggests that the perpetrator couldn't help themselves. Zaroff would have Rainsford believe that his passion is so strong he is unable to prevent himself from fulfilling it.

> "I wanted the ideal animal to hunt," explained the general, "So I said, 'What are the attributes of an ideal quarry?' And the answer was, of course, 'It must have courage, cunning, and, above all, it must be able to reason.'"
>
> "But no animal can reason," objected Rainsford.
>
> "My dear fellow," said the general, "there is one that can."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

Zaroff, admitting to feeling dissatisfied with conventional hunting, explains to Rainsford his ideal traits in prey. The storyline and conversation have been building to this moment when Zaroff and Rainsford finally understand each other. Along with Rainsford, the reader finally understands that this wealthy and fashionable aristocrat has chosen to live alone (except for servants) on a remote island because he doesn't view other men as inherently valuable human beings, but as "the most dangerous game:" prey that have the faculty of reason.

The language Zaroff uses in this section also points to the fact that, to him, men and animals are the same. When Rainsford argues that no "animal" can reason, Zaroff insists that there is "one" that can, verbally grouping humans and animals together as game.

> Hunting? Great Guns, General Zaroff, what you speak of is murder.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In response to Zaroff's revelation that he hunts men, Rainsford draws an ethical line between hunting and murder, insisting that Zaroff is committing the latter. Rainsford's response likely has the reader aligning themselves with him as the voice of morality standing opposed to Zaroff's acts of murder. His chosen interjection is interesting, though, because this is a space where one might often say something like "Good Lord!" or "My God!" and instead Rainsford is invoking the power of weapons—instruments of death. Though he objects to Zaroff hunting men, he, too, participates in taking the lives of weaker beings. In this way, Connell suggests to the reader that despite signaling himself as a principled man, Rainsford might be a flawed champion for the sanctity of human life.

> Life is for the strong, to be lived by the strong, and, if needs be, taken by the strong. The weak of the world were put here to give the strong pleasure. I am strong. Why should I not use my gift? If I wish to hunt, why should I not? I hunt the scum of the earth: sailors from tramp ships—lassars, blacks, Chinese, whites, mongrels—a thoroughbred horse or hound is worth more than a score of them.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Attempting to defend his killing of other men for sport, Zaroff calls on the ideology of social Darwinism popular during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His argument is simply a reiteration of the survival-of-the-fittest mentality in which he, as the stronger, fitter man, is entitled to take

the lives of the weak. He quite literally states that the weak exist for the pleasure of the strong. By ridding the world of the so-called "scum of the earth," he is doing society a favor and ensuring that only the fit survive—and enjoying himself in the process.

In tune with the prejudices of the time (and also today), Zaroff, a white man, considers the "scum" to be racial minorities and social outcasts—people who already experience regular oppression, and he describes their worth as inferior to companion animals. Though Connell writes Zaroff as a clearly immoral villain, he's simply projecting a survival-of-the-fittest worldview onto this man and asking Rainsford and the reader to respond to it. Particularly in the historical context of this story—the mid-1920s—Zaroff's prejudices against the socially disenfranchised were not uncommon. Perhaps Connell is asking the reader to evaluate how much of Zaroff they see reflected in the leaders and policy makers of their own societies.

"Watch! Out there!" exclaimed the general, pointing into the night. Rainsford's eyes saw only blackness, and then, as the general pressed a button, far out to sea Rainsford saw the flash of lights.

The general chuckled. "They indicate a channel," he said, "where there's none; giant rocks with razor edges crouch like a sea monster with wide-open jaws. They can crush a ship as easily as I crush this nut." He dropped a walnut on the hardwood floor and brought his heel grinding down on it. "Oh, yes," he said, casually, as if in answer to a question, "I have electricity. We try to be civilized here."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This is the second time in the story where lights are used as a deceptive safety signal. The first was in the description of Rainsford discovering Zaroff's mansion and hoping to find safety there, but by now he realizes that the more dangerous thing on this island is the man inside the house. Zaroff's chuckle while explaining his trap further emphasizes that this man is a psychopath who is amused by his own murderous machinations. His self-satisfaction followed by his unprompted claims about having electricity to be "civilized" parody the concept of civilization. Zaroff has all the material trappings of civilization—the house, the wealth, the education, and food—without any of the moral underpinnings or capacity for empathy. Once again, Connell emphasizes that Zaroff's character experiences no reservations about forcing devastation upon other human beings. In fact, he relishes it.

"It's a game, you see," pursued the general blandly. "I suggest to one of them that we go hunting. I give him a supply of food and an excellent hunting knife. I give him three hours' start. I am to follow, armed only with a pistol of the smallest caliber and range. If my quarry eludes me for three whole days, he wins the game. If I find him," the general smiled, "he loses."

"Suppose he refuses to be hunted?"

"Oh," said the general, "I give him his option, of course. He need not play that game if he doesn't wish to. If he does not wish to hunt, I turn him over to Ivan. Ivan once had the honor of serving as official knouter to the Great White Czar, and he has his own ideas of sport. Invariably, Mr. Rainsford, invariably they choose the hunt."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In his explanation of the game, Zaroff reveals the hypocrisy both in his machinations and in the social Darwinist mentality behind them. Though he's intending to make it seem as though he's being gracious, it's very clear that the hunted men never stand a chance. An "excellent hunting knife" will never be a fair defense against a pistol, just as a shipwrecked, scared, disoriented sailor will never last long against an experienced, well-rested, heavily-resourced man hunting on his own turf. Social Darwinism allows for dominant groups in a society to feel justified in their dominant position, blaming the disenfranchised for not thriving in a system that wasn't built for them, and then claiming that their existence threatens the survival of the fitter group. In reality, the game was always rigged against the less powerful.

Furthermore, Zaroff claims to give the men an "option" between being hunted or being handed over to Ivan, who used to be an official "knouter," or torturer. As with their impossible social situation, the trapped men are forced into an impossible choice where both options result in death. Zaroff, like other subscribers to social Darwinism, are not interested in fairness or humaneness but instead are

motivated solely by the desire to perpetuate their positions of power.

> The general was playing with him! The general was saving him for another day's sport! The Cossack was the cat; he was the mouse. Then it was that Rainsford knew the full meaning of terror.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Only when pulled into a murderous man's game does Rainsford finally realize how the hunted animal feels. He explicitly connects himself with the mouse, the prey, and experiences for the first time the terror of running for one's life. Even though Rainsford fought in the war (as the reader knows from earlier conversations), he hasn't felt true terror until this moment because the rules are so dramatically different: there are no real rules. He is no longer armed, uniformed, fighting alongside comrades in a battle where there are some socially agreed upon rules. This violence, at least from the perspective of the prey, is senseless and Rainsford is utterly alone.

It is also this feeling of terror that motivates his next actions. The terror pulls him into the game and into the violence in a way that he seems to have been resisting before. Now that Rainsford wholly understands that he is in a circumstance void of basic social contracts, he quickly adapts his behavior accordingly.

> The general made one of his deepest bows. "I see," he said. "Splendid! One of us is to furnish a repast for the hounds. The other will sleep in this very excellent bed. On guard, Rainsford."...
>
> He had never slept in a better bed, Rainsford decided.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Up to the very end, Zaroff keeps the pretense of civilized society. In this moment, faced with a fight to the death, he bows and acts as though they were fencing, saying "On guard." To him, the violence is still a game and an amusing one. By omitting a description of the fight, Connell leaves it up to the reader to assume that Rainsford has killed Zaroff and thus, earned a rest in his bed. Connell also refrains from making any comments about Rainsford's actions, leaving it open for the reader to interpret how they feel. It's true that Zaroff was a murderer and Rainsford likely would not have been safe while he was alive, but during this final scene, Zaroff is apparently unarmed, they are not at war, and they are in the intimate space of his bedroom.

Now fully immersed in the game, Rainsford has crossed his own ethical line, killing two men by the end of the story. The narrator only shows readers his contentment, suggesting that when there is no society to answer to, Rainsford's conscience does not feel so burdened by questions surrounding the ethics of killing. Without Ivan and Zaroff, no one is pursuing him anymore, but no one is there to demand accountability for his actions either, and as the narrator suggests, the knowledge has allowed him to rest easy. This ending lets the reader mull over the murky ethics of the story and to question Rainsford's identity as an ethical man.

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.

THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME

Sanger Rainsford and his friend Whitney are sailing on a yacht heading to the Amazon to hunt jaguars. It's a particularly dark night, and Whitney explains to Rainsford the superstition surrounding an ominous place they are passing called **Ship-Trap Island**. He claims that not even cannibals would live there because it's such an evil place.

The darkness of the evening immediately creates a mysterious, foreboding atmosphere and associates the island with a strong sense of dread. Even Whitney, a courageous hunter of jaguars, is afraid of the island. His comment about the cannibals suggests that it's too wild and uncivilized even for barbaric people.

Between comments about the **island**, Rainsford and Whitney (who are both hunters) argue about whether animals experience thoughts and feelings. Rainsford concludes that animals understand nothing and that living creatures are divided into hunters and prey.

Here, Connell establishes one of the overarching themes of the narrative: predator vs. prey. Whitney's questioning allows the reader a glimpse into Rainsford's Darwinist worldview that the dominant species naturally prey on the weaker. By refusing to entertain notions about animals' feelings, it is much easier for him to kill them for sport without guilt.

Rainsford stays on deck for a late-night smoke when he hears three gunshots in the distance. Leaning over the railing to investigate, he loses his balance and falls overboard. With the yacht sailing by without him, Rainsford swims to the mysterious **island** with the sounds of "animal" screams and gunshots to guide him.

The sound of gunshots coming from the direction of the island is the first hint that it is inhabited. The gunshot sounds pull Rainsford into the ocean away from the safety of his friends on the yacht. By demonstrating how cool-headed Rainsford remains in an emergency situation, Connell shows readers that he is experienced at survival and possesses impressive stamina to make it to the island. The gunshots and screams (sounds of violence) would make most people shrink away, but Rainsford is drawn to them, expecting that he will safety with another hunter.

Once on shore and rested, Rainsford investigates the jungle's edge and finds **blood**-stained weeds and signs of a hunter, which, he reasons, indicate the **island** is inhabited. He walks along the jungle's edge and seeing lights in the darkness, he assumes there must be a village. The lights guide him not to a village but an enormous **mansion**, which he takes for a mirage at first.

Rainsford assumes the blood in the grass is animal blood, and the evidence of a hunter outfitted with a pistol and hunting boots suggests civilized inhabitants, making Rainsford hopeful for food and shelter. The unexpected appearance of the mansion reinforces assumptions about the inhabitants; only people of high society could have a house like that. But such an estate suggests something more: it is a permanent dwelling that undoubtedly required an enormous effort to construct and maintain, indicating that the owner made a deliberate choice to live away from the rest of civilization.

Rainsford knocks on the front door, and a giant man opens it, pointing a gun at him. Rainsford tries to introduce himself to the man, who doesn't respond. An older and more elegant man appears and introduces himself as General Zaroff and the large man as Ivan, his servant who is deaf and mute.

The loaded pistol is an unexpected and violent greeting from such an elegant place, warning Rainsford and the reader that the inhabitants might not be as civilized as their house would suggest. General Zaroff's name reveals his military background, and the reader is led to wonder why an aristocratic general who lives on a remote island would need the services of a body guard who is unable to hear or speak.

Zaroff recognizes Rainsford's name and welcomes the celebrated hunter into his home with clothing, lodging, and fine dining. Over an elaborate dinner, Rainsford admires Zaroff's animal head collection, and the two men bond over their love of hunting. Zaroff explains how integral hunting is to his identity ever since his father, a wealthy Russian nobleman, encouraged his shooting skills.

Zaroff's compliment to Rainsford tells the reader that Rainsford is such a talented hunter that he's famous for it. In other words, he's an expert killer. Discussing the killing of animals is considered a gentlemanly pastime, and from Zaroff's story of his upbringing, the reader knows that hunting is encouraged in young boys, especially upper-class ones. But what Rainsford sees as bonding over a mutual love for hunting has a sinister dimension that he has yet to fully grasp.

Zaroff explains that he had to leave Russia because of his position as an officer in the former Czar's military and searched for ways to occupy his time. Even his sole passion, hunting, became dull because it was too easy, so he "invented" a new animal to hunt.

Though exiled from his home country, Zaroff clearly had the resources to live wherever he liked, and he chose a remote island. Admitting that his "raison d'être," or reason for existence, is hunting signals another red flag. Though many men would proudly declare that hunting is their favorite hobby, claiming that killing things is his purpose in life indicates the mind of a psychopath.

After Rainsford presses him, Zaroff explains that he prefers to hunt humans because unlike animals, humans possess the faculty of reason and are, therefore, more dangerous and exciting to hunt.

His long lead-up to revealing that he hunts humans demonstrates that Zaroff knows killing humans (outside of warfare) is socially unacceptable, and that he rejects society and its ethics. He enjoys hunting humans not despite but because of *their capacity for feelings and rational thought. At the beginning of the story, Rainsford refuses to entertain the idea that animals feel anything—let alone that they are able to reason. As a foil to Rainsford, Zaroff openly declares his passion for hunting advanced, intelligent prey.*

Shocked, Rainsford insists that Zaroff is committing murder, and refuses his invitation to participate in the manhunt. Zaroff responds by accusing Rainsford of sentimental notions about the value of human life, which are feelings he thinks Rainsford's military experience should have erased. Zaroff then attempts to justify killing by stating that he's hunting men who belong to society's lowest ranks—outcasts and racial minorities.

Here Connell has the characters play around with the blurry ethical lines between socially condoned killing (hunting and warfare) and murder. Zaroff doesn't see the distinction between killing men as a duty to country and killing them for sport and thinks Rainsford, as an experienced military man, should feel the same. Zaroff's attempted justification reveals his extreme social Darwinist views: he sees those who are marked as socially "unfit" as fair game for his hunt.

Zaroff demonstrates for Rainsford how he stocks the **island** with fresh human prey by tricking ships to sail into the cliffs with guiding lights. He boasts about having electricity and trying to be civilized. Again, Rainsford is outraged. Defending his treatment of the shipwrecked men, Zaroff claims to treat them with consideration, and refers to their imprisonment as a "training school."

Just as lights guided Rainsford, seeking safety, to Zaroff's mansion, Zaroff lures sailors to their death with false safety lights. Zaroff's ironic comment about having electricity and trying to be civilized parodies the concept of civilization, as he possesses all the trappings of civilization but none of the underlying humanity. Just as many euphemisms have been used historically to justify human rights violations of disenfranchised people, Zaroff calls his human slaughter house a "training school."

The game, Zaroff explains, is that he gives the man hunting clothes, a supply of food, a hunting knife, and a three-hour head start. He follows with a small pistol, and if the hunted man eludes him for three days, he wins. Only one man has come close to winning, and then Zaroff used his hunting dogs.

Perhaps intending to sound fair, Zaroff reveals the hypocrisy both in his game and in social Darwinist ideology: the playing field is never even, and the circumstances never fair. Though he provides resources to the hunted men, they were never meant to stand a chance against him, and their inevitable failure just reinforces his belief that they were always inferior—and therefore justifiable prey.

Rainsford asks what happens if the men refuse to be hunted, and Zaroff explains that the men can choose to participate in his game or be handed over to Ivan, who was a professional torturer for the Russian Czar.

Again, Connell underscores the inequality of Zaroff's game. Choosing between being hunted (with no hope of winning) or being tortured to death is not a choice at all.

Zaroff then offers to show Rainsford his new collection of heads, but Rainsford declines and retires to his room for the night, where he discovers he's been locked in and cannot escape the **house** or the **island**.

Now knowing that Zaroff is a serial killer, the reader must wonder whether this collection is of animal or human heads. Suddenly, the familiar custom seems newly grotesque. Once in his room, Rainsford realizes that he is not in a fancy paradise, but rather a well-disguised prison.

The next day, Zaroff and Rainsford meet again for lunch, and Zaroff complains that last night's hunt was boring because the man made obvious mistakes. Rainsford demands to leave the island immediately, but Zaroff insists they will hunt that night. Rainsford refuses to hunt with him, and Zaroff gives him the choice between being hunted or being given to Ivan. Excited to have pulled Rainsford into his game, Zaroff toasts to finally having an adversary worthy of his skills.

Zaroff blames the hunted man for his own death and for not providing enough entertainment in dying, much as social Darwinism blames minorities and the socially oppressed for not thriving in a system that is engineered to disadvantage them. Rainsford, perhaps unconsciously, also participates in the "othering" of social minorities by assuming he would receive preferential treatment as he is not one of "them." By forcing Rainsford into his game, Zaroff demonstrates that, whatever the given pretense, his intention is simply to kill other men because he can.

When Rainsford asks what happens if he wins, Zaroff assures him that he can leave the **island**, but on the condition that he never tells anyone about his experiences there. Rainsford refuses those terms, and they agree to discuss it after the game's end.

By now the reader has good reason to doubt Zaroff's promise to return Rainsford to mainland should he win. Rainsford, an honest man, refuses the terms when he could have lied to protect himself, and Zaroff openly rejects social contracts, so there's no reason to believe he would keep his word anyway.

Zaroff jumps into preparations for the hunt, even giving Rainsford tips about what shoes to wear and dangerous places on the **island** to avoid. He leaves to take a nap before pursuing Rainsford at dusk. Hunting is more fun at night, he says.

Knowing that the game is rigged in his favor, Zaroff arrogantly gives Rainsford survival tips. Probably as a psychological scare tactic, Zaroff confidently lets Rainsford know he will pursue him well-rested and with ease.

Rainsford makes his way through the jungle, doubling over his trail as a fox would, until he climbs into a large tree to rest once night falls. He feels secure and certain that Zaroff couldn't have followed his trail.

Connell's language as the hunt begins associates Rainsford with commonly hunted animals, making the central irony of the story explicit: the formerly celebrated hunter has become prey. Though never having been prey before, Rainsford mistakenly feels confident in his evasive abilities.

Zaroff finds Rainsford's hiding spot almost at once. He never looks right at him but casually strolls just underneath him, smoking a perfumed cigarette, before leaving without a word. Rainsford realizes that Zaroff is toying with him, like a cat with a mouse, and feels true terror for the first time in his life.

Zaroff begins the hunt with another assertion of his thirst for power: he doesn't just want to hunt Rainsford, he wants Rainsford to realize his superiority as the ultimate hunter. Rainsford gets the message and understands the fear of being hunted, something he previously denied that animals feel.

Running further into the jungle, Rainsford stops to craft a trap out of a dead tree. He succeeds in injuring Zaroff, buying himself more time while Zaroff tends to his wounded shoulder.

Finally realizing the severity of his situation and motivated by his fear, Rainsford becomes immersed in the game and starts fighting back.

Plodding on through the night, Rainsford accidently steps into quicksand but pulls himself free. The soft ground inspires him and makes a large pit with pointed sticks at the bottom. As he works he thinks about how he feels more desperate now than he did during the war.

Increasingly getting better at striking against his attackers, Rainsford shakes his hesitations about playing Zaroff's game. He feels more desperate now than in the war because there are no rules for what he's experiencing, and even in war there are some socially agreed-upon rules.

Waiting for Zaroff to fall into his trap, Rainsford momentarily feels victorious until he sees that the trap claimed only a hunting dog. Zaroff congratulates him on this score and goes home to rest, promising to return with the whole pack of hunting dogs.

When he realizes that Rainsford is more than a match for him, Zaroff immediately sways the game even further in his favor, signaling that for all of his posturing, Zaroff is a coward. For someone who makes a sport of hunting humans, it should come as no surprise that this man feels no compunction about breaking his word.

At daybreak, Rainsford wakes to the sound of baying dogs and sees Zaroff and Ivan drawing nearer. Considering his options, Rainsford creates another trap using a tree sapling and his hunting knife. Then he runs, understanding now how a hunted animal feels. The baying stops, and Rainsford pauses for a look. He sees that Zaroff remains standing, but the knife booby-trap has apparently killed Ivan. Rainsford flees again.

Rainsford has just killed a person outside of warfare, but neither he nor the reader is allowed a moment to think about this as he races off again. Ivan, a deaf and mute man, is treated more like a big guard dog in the story than a person, and the narrator treats his death like just another slain animal, leading the readers to question whether the narrator also subscribes, consciously or not, to social Darwinist ideology.

Reaching the edge of the jungle, Rainsford sees the **mansion** across the cove. Faced with the choice of risking the rocky waters below or waiting for Zaroff and his dogs, Rainsford jumps into the water.

Rainsford has come full circle back to his situation at the beginning of the story—falling into unknown waters. But this time, he's swimming away from the gunshots and the hunter now that he's at the receiving end of their violence.

Thinking Rainsford jumped to this death, Zaroff shrugs, takes a swig from his flask, enjoys a cigarette, and hums *Madame Butterfly*, an Italian opera, before returning home.

Again, Connell highlights Zaroff's superficial civility. The opera Zaroff hums is about the human cost of self-serving behavior, but to Zaroff it merely sounds pretty.

While eating dinner that evening, Zaroff feels annoyed about having to replace Ivan and that Rainsford didn't stick around to fight or be killed. He enjoys the material comforts of his **mansion**, reads some Marcus Aurelius, and goes to his bedroom.

Emphasizing Ivan's treatment as subhuman, Zaroff thinks about his death as an inconvenience, not a moment for grief. He enjoys his material wealth only at a surface level; like Madame Butterfly, *Zaroff doesn't understand the stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, whose writings famously advocated for strong ethical principles and avoidance of material indulgences.*

Once locked into his room, Zaroff turns to see Rainsford standing next to his bed. Demanding to know how he got there, Rainsford says he swam. Zaroff congratulates Rainsford on winning the game, but Rainsford refuses the victory and tells Zaroff to ready himself. The story closes with Rainsford deciding he had never slept in a better bed.

Just as Rainsford felt falsely secure in his hiding spot, Zaroff feels mistakenly safe in his mansion. As Rainsford presumably kills Zaroff, he experiences contentment and satisfaction. The reader might question Rainsford's crossing of the ethical line he established at the beginning of the story. Perhaps it was in self-defense or vengeance, but Rainsford has just killed a man in his own home and then slept in his bed—and feels nothing but contentment. Connell could be suggesting that when men are separated from a social conscience and consequences, they devolve into brutal violence without remorse. Additionally, since Rainsford won Zaroff's game and proved himself the fitter man, the reader must question whether the story is challenging social Darwinist ideology or supporting it. The ending of the story suggests that Rainsford may even take up Zaroff's mantle as a hunter of humans.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

McLendon, Kelsey. "*The Most Dangerous Game*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Mar 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

McLendon, Kelsey. "*The Most Dangerous Game*." LitCharts LLC, March 23, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-most-dangerous-game.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Most Dangerous Game* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Connell, Richard. The Most Dangerous Game. Waking Lion Press. 2010.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Connell, Richard. The Most Dangerous Game. Salt Lake City: Waking Lion Press. 2010.