**Reader-centred Reading**

Before reading Richard Connell’s *“The Most Dangerous Game”,* I found myself expecting a typical adventure/terror story with ‘good’ predictably prevailing over ‘evil’. To a large extent, this preconception held true. I had read numerous adventure and terror stories, both for personal enjoyment and as a student. Because of this, I knew that my approach to reading may differ from someone who had little experience with, or who did not enjoy, this genre. I also anticipated that the story would not be intellectually stimulating, in that there would, inherently, be a lack of puzzling symbolism and mystery. Nonetheless, I knew I would enjoy the story despite its simplicity and predictability. What I did not expect however, was how closely the ideas about the sanctity of the human life in the story would resonate with my own.

The story follows the adventures of Sanger Rainsford, a big game hunter, who tumbles from his ship in the Caribbean Sea and is washed ashore on Ship-Trap Island, a mysterious place tainted with superstition and fear. On the island he finds General Zaroff, an obsessive hunter in a palatial chateau, along with his deaf mute servant, Ivan. Zaroff is a sadistic narcissist who has grown tired of hunting game, instead wishing to hunt the “*ideal animal*”. He had purchased the island in order to cunningly deceive ships into being washed ashore. The surviving sailors are taken into his care and are given a choice: be released into the jungle and be hunted, by Zaroff, or be beaten to death by Ivan. Rainsford is faced with this same dilemma. He sets off into the jungle to be hunted.

When Connell first introduced the danger of Rainsford being hunted by Zaroff, I began to formulate in my mind the sequence of events that would follow. I expected Rainsford to struggle with the adversities imposed upon him, but ultimately to triumph and, thus, to create an enjoyable conclusion. The use of ‘cliff-hanger’ situations also guided me to the predicted outcome, and ultimately the meaning. For example, *“Twenty feet below him the sea rumbled and hissed. Rainsford hesitated. He heard the hounds. Then he leaped out far into the sea....”* Statements such as this made me wonder what would happen next. I concluded that Rainsford survived the leap, and that he would inevitably triumph over Zaroff.

Because of the type of narrative, I found myself reflecting on previously read stories, particularly horror/terror novels such as Bram Stoker's *“Dracula”*. Because of his sadistic and cruel personality, I envisaged Zaroff to be similar to the manipulative and deceitful Count Dracula. Both Zaroff and Dracula convey cordiality while in actuality dominating others with power and violence. Furthermore, Connell’s use of imagery also enhanced my visualisation of the scene. For example, *“the massive door with a leering gargoyle for a knocker”* and *“cliffs dived down where the sea licked greedy lips in the shadows”* created connotations of a dark, terrifying setting.

I sympathised with Rainsford and found myself becoming frustrated and angry with Zaroff. His arrogant, egotistical attitude is drastically different to my own attitude. For instance, Zaroff believes *“the weak of the world were put here to give the strong pleasure”.* He self righteously believes that hunting *“the scum of the earth: sailors from tramp ships”* is justified. I found myself reflecting on encounters I have had with personalities, who, whilst usually not murderous, were similar to Zaroff. These people cause me to feel animosity and frustration. For this reason, I was inclined to accept the values of Rainsford, who is in stark moral opposition to the idea of hunting humans. This was most likely Connell’s intention in creating two highly different characters. As an educated and, I hope, morally sound person I am predisposed to read the story in the way in which Connell intended. Ultimately, I find that I am in acceptance of Connell’s theme that all life is precious, and to place a higher value on one life over another is utterly wrong.

**Reader-centred Defence**

Historically, reliance had been placed on the ‘words on the page’ as the singular and indisputable source of meaning in literary texts. This New Critical, text-centred approach to reading argued that since the text’s literary structure was stable, the meaning thereby remained independent of *“changes in the social and cultural contexts of readers”* (QSA, 2010 p14). This approach was problematized by reader-centred theorists throughout the twentieth century, who believed that meaning is not solely fixed in the text; rather it is produced in what Louise Rosenblatt (1938) referred to as a ‘transaction’ between reader and text. “*The meaning 'happens' during the transaction between the reader and the signs on the page.”* (Rosenblatt, 1995, citied in Church 1997). That is, the reader brings to the text elements of their own textual, personal, psychological, social and cultural experiences, to create a meaning unique to themselves (Beach, 1993).

Reader-centred theorists also questioned the authority of the author in creating meaning. Historically, it was thought that the author’s intended meaning was locked within the text, and as such could not be misinterpreted by the reader. However, theorists such as Wimsatt and Breadsley challenged the authority the author held in the meaning making process, by deeming it the *“intentional fallacy”* (QSA 2010).

Whilst reader-centred theorists agree that the reader plays a central role in the interpretive process, there are variations in the relative emphasis they place on the textual and psychological aspects of the reader’s response. John Lye categorised theorists according to the extent to which the text or reader is emphasised in the meaning making process (Lye, 1996) His ‘position one’ stresses the importance that the texts holds in generating meaning. This position, however, differs from a purely text-centred approach as it does accept the ‘transactional’ relationship between reader and text. It is argued that the reader’s knowledge of text conventions such as symbols and narrative structures helps to create meaning but does not generate the meaning entirely. Lye’s ‘second position’ takes the stance that the text and the reader have equal importance in the interpretive process. Theorists within this category agree that the readers’ own psychological and social perspectives and knowledge of textual aspects influence the interpretive process equally. Lye’s ‘third position’ emphasises the reader as the most important component in the interpretive process. Here, the reader’s thoughts, beliefs and experiences are imposed upon the text, thus creating a meaning that is acceptable within their culture.

Having read Richard Connell’s “*The Most Dangerous Game*” self-reflexively, I realise that I initially placed a strong emphasis on the textual elements of the story, in what may be described as a *“structuralist approach”* to reading (Lye, 1996).The textual elements within the story *“guided my predicted outcome, and ultimately the meaning I created”* in what Saussure calls the *“scientific approach to reading”* (Saussure, as citied in Manji, 2005) whereby the story is analysed by the reader for common textual elements such as “*imagery*”. Depictions such as, *“cliffs dived down where the sea licked greedy lips in the shadows”,* allowed me to visualise a dark and mysterious setting and thus to predict the mood and atmosphere of the story. Also, the *“stark”* differences between the two central characters create what Saussure recognises as a binary opposition. Connell emphasises the humanistic ideologies held by Rainsford over the cruel ideologies held by Zaroff. Therefore, one side of the opposition is privileged over the other (Moon, 2001). Thus I was *“inclined to accept the ideologies and values of Rainsford”* over Zaroff.

As the story is what Umberto Echo would describe as a “closed” text (Radford, 2001), in that it is ‘closed’ to a multitude of alternative readings and allows for only a small field of creative interpretation, there was a significant lack in “*puzzling symbolism and mystery*” thereby creating an unsatisfying text in terms of intellectual stimulation. This affected what Rosenblatt calls my *“aesthetic”* enjoyment of the text (Rosenblatt, 1938), in that it created little hermeneutical challenge. Unlike a “*closed”* text, an *“open”* text challenges the reader to fill gaps thus creating a more fulfilling interpretive experience. Therefore, while a structuralist approach was somewhat beneficial in helping me to determine meaning, it was limited by the scope of such a *“closed”* text.

As a result, throughout the reflective review, I mainly adopted Lye’s middle ground in that I utilised knowledge of textual elements, and my own psychological and social perspectives to illuminate meaning. Consequently, I realise that, because “*I had read numerous adventure and terror stories”*, I relied heavily on what Jauss calls the “horizons of expectations” in that I held strong preconceptions about the sequence of events which would occur throughout the text (QSA, 2010, page). I anticipated, based on my knowledge of what the genre should entail, a *“typical adventure/terror story”* that would follow a generic structure and conclude in a predicable ending.

Towards the end of my reflective review, I utilised Lye’s “psychological and social perspective” by applying what Norman Holland’s calls *“Identity Theory”*, a theory which suggests the reader actively transacts with the text to re-create their own identities by imposing their ideas and values upon the text. This theory became evident when I “*sympathised with Rainsford”* and found myself *“becoming frustrated and angry at Zaroff”*. “*As an educated and, I hope, morally sound person*” in a Judaic Christian society my *“identity”* aligned more closely with ideologies conveyed by Rainsford than Zaroff. I felt *“animosity and frustration”* towards Zaroff as his personality contradicted by own identity. As such, I created a meaning unique to my own personality and psychology. I concluded my reflective review by stating that I was in “*acceptance of Connell’s theme*”. Therefore, by accepting the ideologies of Rainsford, and rejecting those of Zaroff I am in agreement with the humanistic sentiment that values the equality of human life. I have thereby become what Iser describes as the “implied reader” (QSA 2010 p16) in that the ideologies emphasised by Connell coincide with my own.

In conclusion, whilst the textual elements of the story illuminated some meaning, the lack of a hermeneutical challenge limited the interpretive process. Thus, I found a middle ground, reader-centred approach to be the most useful as this incorporated my knowledge of the textual elements of the story, limited as they may be, but also allowed for my own psychology and social experiences to influence the meaning created.

1. **Length 1725 (1,000- 1500 allowed, quotes excluded)**

**Long intro; not quite enough on own reading style; not enough evaluation of relative merits of approaches in allowing you to make meaning i.e. usefulness and limitations of approaches; writing style a little stilted.**

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**Questions (answer before you read task sheet):**

* **Predict:** From your understanding of this ‘reading’ and ‘defence’, what might the task be asking you to do i.e. what might be the purpose of the task? What might the word ‘defence’ mean?
* Where might you find a text like this (context)?
* Who might the intended audience be?
* What knowledge would you need to build in order to complete the task on your own chosen story?
* What kinds of writing skills will you need to develop?

**Now read the task sheet.**

You should now be ready to learn more about reader-centred approaches to meaning making: the theorists, the techniques and strategies theorists use; the vocabulary/concepts and the questions to ask.