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## Plot Overview

On a yacht bound for Rio de Janeiro, a passenger named Whitney points out Ship-Trap Island in the distance, a place that sailors dread and avoid. He and his friend Rainsford are big-game hunters bound for a hunting trip in the Amazon River basin. As the yacht sails through the darkness, the two men discuss whether their prey actually feels fear. Rainsford believes that the world consists only of predators and prey, although Whitney is not as certain. Noticing the jitteriness of the crew, Whitney wants to sail past the mysterious island as soon as possible. He theorizes that sailors can sense danger and that evil emanates in waves like light and sound.

Whitney then decides to turn in for the night, but Rainsford opts to smoke his pipe on the afterdeck for a while. Suddenly, he hears three gunshots in the distance and moves toward the railing of the deck to investigate. Hoisting himself onto the rail to try and get a better look, Rainsford drops his pipe, loses his balance in an attempt to catch it, and accidentally plunges into the water. His cries for help go unanswered, and the yacht quickly disappears into the night.

Rainsford decides to swim in the gunshots' direction. He hears the screeching sound of an animal in agony and heads straight for it, until the cries end abruptly with a pistol shot. Exhausted, Rainsford reaches the rocky shore and immediately falls into a deep sleep. He wakes the next afternoon and sets off in search of food, forced to skirt the thick growth of the jungle and walk along the shore. He soon comes to a bloody, torn-up patch of vegetation where a large animal had thrashed about. He finds an empty rifle cartridge nearby.

He follows the hunter's footprints in the growing darkness and eventually comes upon a palatial chateau at the edge of a precipice that drops steeply into the rocky ocean below. At first, Rainsford thinks the chateau is a mirage, until he opens the iron gate and knocks on the door. Ivan, a burly man with a gun, answers and refuses to help Rainsford until another man, General Zaroff, appears from inside the chateau and invites Rainsford inside.

Zaroff greets Rainsford warmly and has Ivan show him to a room where he can dress for dinner. The huge, lavish dining hall features numerous stuffed and mounted heads, trophies that Zaroff has brought back from his many hunting adventures around the world. As the two men eat borscht, a red Russian soup made of beets, Rainsford praises his host's specimens, remarking on how dangerous it can be to hunt Cape buffalo. Zaroff states that he now hunts far more dangerous game on his island. He recounts past hunts, from his childhood in the Crimea to hunting big game around the world, but goes on to describe how the sport eventually became too easy.

Zaroff hints, however, that he has found a new kind of animal to hunt, one with courage, cunning, and reason. Rainsford's initial confusion turns to horror as he slowly realizes that the general now hunts human beings. Zaroff doesn't understand Rainsford's indignation but promises that his outrage will subside once he's begun the hunt. Rainsford declines Zaroff's invitation to join in the hunt that night and goes to bed. After a fitful night of insomnia and light dozing, the sound of a distant pistol shot awakens him in the early morning.

General Zaroff reappears at the chateau at lunchtime, sad that hunting humans no longer satisfies him.

He laments that the sailors he lures to the island present less and less of a challenge. Rainsford demands to leave the island at once, but the general refuses and forces Rainsford to be his new prey in the next hunt, hoping that Rainsford, as a renowned big-game hunter, will provide the challenge he seeks. Zaroff promises to set Rainsford free if he lives through the next three days. Rainsford sets off into the jungle after receiving food, clothes, and a knife from Ivan. He cuts a complicated, twisting path through the undergrowth to confuse Zaroff and then climbs a tree to wait as darkness approaches.

Zaroff finds Rainsford easily but lets him escape to prolong the pleasure of the hunt. Unsettled that Zaroff found him so quickly, Rainsford runs to another part of the jungle and makes a booby-trap called a Malayan mancatcher to kill Zaroff. The trap only wounds Zaroff, who returns to the chateau and promises to kill Rainsford the following night.

Rainsford runs for hours until he mistakenly steps into a bed of quicksand. He manages to wrest free, then digs a pit in the soft mud a few feet in front of the quicksand. He lines the bottom of the pit with sharp wooden stakes, covers it with foliage, and then hides in the brush nearby. One of Zaroff's hunting hounds springs the trap and plunges to his death, forcing Zaroff to return to the chateau again. At daybreak, Rainsford hears the baying of the hounds and spots Zaroff and Ivan with a small pack of hunting dogs in the distance. Rainsford fashions another trap by tying his knife to a sapling.

The trap kills Ivan, but the hounds push on, cornering Rainsford at the edge of a cliff. Instead of facing the dogs, Rainsford jumps into the rocky sea below. Stunned and disappointed, Zaroff returns to his chateau. As he turns on his bedroom light, he is shocked to find Rainsford concealed in the curtains of the bed. Before they fight, Zaroff states that the dogs will eat one of them that night while the other will sleep in the comfortable bed. Rainsford later concludes that he has never slept in a more comfortable bed.

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### Character List

Sanger Rainsford - A world-renowned big-game hunter and the story's protagonist. Intelligent, experienced, and level-headed, Rainsford uses his wits and physical prowess to outwit General Zaroff. His understanding of civilization and the relationship between hunter and prey is radically transformed during his harrowing days on the island. Hiding from Zaroff, he recalls his days fighting in the trenches of World War I, where he witnessed unimaginable violence. At the same time, the three-day chase reverses his life of privilege and ease, forcing him to sacrifice comfort and luxury to survive.

General Zaroff - A Russian Cossack and expatriate who lives on Ship-Trap Island and enjoys hunting men. General Zaroff's high cheekbones, sharply defined nose, and pointed military mustache accentuate his mysteriousness and savagery. With a cultivated voice and deliberate, slightly accented way of speaking, his regal bearing and rarefied aristocratic air belie his dementia and sadism. He hunts human beings to experience the most satisfying thrill.

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Whitney - Rainsford's friend and traveling companion. On the yacht, Whitney suggests to Rainsford that hunted animals feel fear. Highly suggestible, Whitney feels anxious as they sail near the mysterious Ship-Trap Island. He argues that evil emanates in waves like light and sound

Ivan - A Cossack and Zaroff's mute assistant. A man of formidable physical stature, Ivan has a waist-length black beard and wears a black uniform. All of Zaroff's captives prefer to flee from Zaroff as prey rather than suffer torture and certain death at Ivan's hands.

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## Analysis of Major Characters

### Sanger Rainsford

The protagonist, Sanger Rainsford, is an adventurous big-game hunter who confronts the nature of life and death for the first time in his life during his few frightening days on Ship-Trap Island. Calm and composed, Rainsford coolly handles any challenge, be it falling overboard in the middle of the night or having to swim several miles to reach the shore. He's survived numerous near-death experiences, from fighting on the frontlines during World War I to hunting dangerous animals in some of the world's most exotic locales. Rainsford's wartime experiences have reinforced his ultimate belief in the primacy of human life and the respect it deserves. Only during Zaroff's relentless final pursuit does Rainsford truly feel fear and his own primal instinct to survive.

The long-term ramifications of Rainsford's harrowing ordeal remain indeterminate and unresolved, however, because Connell purposefully chooses to leave any transformation in Rainsford's character uncharted. Although Connell suggests that Rainsford now empathizes with the creatures he has hunted in the past, it is uncertain whether he will discontinue hunting in the future. On one hand, Rainsford could possibly abandon hunting altogether or at least approach it with a new respect for his prey. Conversely, Rainsford's ability to sleep so soundly after killing Zaroff may suggest that he has become even more ruthless or hasn't undergone any significant transformation at all.

### General Zaroff

General Zaroff's refined mannerisms conceal a maniacal desire to inflict suffering and death for his own amusement. In many ways, Zaroff considers himself a god who can snuff out life as he pleases. Zaroff's madness stems from a life of wealth, luxury, and militarism, which inflate his ego and sense of entitlement and impose few limits on his desires. Zaroff began hunting at an early age when he shot his father's prized turkeys and continually sought out bigger game in his family's tract of wilderness in the Crimea, a peninsula on the Black Sea. Commanding a division of Cossack cavalymen in Russia, meanwhile, familiarized Zaroff with the horrors and atrocities of warfare. His bloodlust and passion for hunting eventually prompted him to hunt men, the most cunning and challenging prey he could find.

Accustomed to death, General Zaroff has lost the ability to distinguish men from beasts, suggesting that he has slipped into barbarism and lost his humanity. The sanctioned violence of his youth and early manhood drained the general of his empathy and capacity to make moral judgments. His passion for the

hunt and love of the refined, meanwhile, led him to devalue human life. In fact, Zaroff even praises his thoroughbred hounds over the lives of the sailors he hunts. Connell describes Zaroff's sharp pointed teeth and smacking red lips to dehumanize him and highlight his predatory nature. Ironically, Rainsford discovers that General Zaroff is far more repulsive than the "scum" he disdainfully hunts, devoid of all emotion and humanity despite his seeming gentility.

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## Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

### Themes

#### Reason versus Instinct

Reason and instinct are not as mutually exclusive as people have traditionally thought. Writers and philosophers have traditionally placed human intellect and the ability to reason above the bestial instincts of wild animals, which have no moral compulsions and act solely to satisfy their own needs. Reason, therefore, transforms mere animals into people and allows them to live together in functioning societies. Connell first blurs the dichotomy between reason and instinct through Rainsford's friend Whitney, who asserts that animals instinctively feel fear and then confesses that Captain Neilson's description of Ship-Trap Island has given him the chills. Without realizing it, Whitney admits that his perception of the island has sparked a sense of dread in him, just as perceived danger induces fear in an animal.

Connell further turns the table on the idea that reason exists apart from instinct by reducing the gentleman hunter Rainsford to the role of prey in General Zaroff's sadistic hunt. Rainsford comes to realize that all creatures, including people, rely on fear and their instinct to survive to avoid pain and death, just as Whitney had originally argued. Nevertheless, Rainsford remains calm in spite of his fear and works methodically to evade death and even defeat Zaroff. Despite his desire to kill his pursuers, however, Rainsford keeps his perspective and continues to value human life, therefore remaining more man than beast. In contrast, the genteel General Zaroff reveals himself to be more animal than human by rationally concluding that people are no different from other living creatures and by ruthlessly hunting men to satisfy his inner bloodlust. Zaroff's and Rainsford's cool rationality and calculating cunning throughout the entire hunt belies the fact that each man acts only according to instinct, one to survive and the other to kill.

#### The Effects of War

Although Rainsford and Zaroff have similar backgrounds and are both wealthy hunters, they have radically different interpretations of their wartime experiences. Zaroff tells Rainsford about his days slumming in the Russian army, a brief dalliance commanding a Cossack cavalry division that ultimately distracted him from his love of the hunt. He nevertheless conveniently retains the title of general in a nod to his thirst for power over other individuals' lives. Connell also suggests that Zaroff's martial experiences altered him and allowed him to think of other people as worthy prey. The general's inflated ego, disdain for humanity, and sadistic thrill at inflicting suffering all stem from seeing life through the sights of a rifle. Zaroff finds Rainsford's outrage naïve, primly Victorian, and overly puritan. Rainsford, however, remembers the grueling, harrowing aspects of warfare. He recalls desperately digging trenches with insufficient tools while on the European frontlines in World War I. The sense of desperation and powerlessness that his war years instilled in him revisit him during his three-day trial on the island.

## Motifs

### The Color Red

The color red permeates the story to highlight the blood, violence, and death on Ship-Trap Island. In the beginning of the story, for example, Rainsford falls off his yacht into the "blood-warm waters" of the sea, symbolically marking him as a target of future violence. Upon reaching the shore, he discovers a crushed patch of weeds "stained crimson." As Rainsford moves deeper into the interior of the island, the color red becomes more directly linked with the bloodlust of General Zaroff, from the crimson sash his body guard, Ivan, wears to the steaming bowls of red borscht he serves Rainsford. Connell refers to the general's "red-lipped" smile twice, at one point extending the description to include a flash of Zaroff's pointed, fanglike teeth. Connell focuses less on the color red as soon as the hunt begins to emphasize Rainsford's level-headedness and foreshadow his ultimate triumph over Zaroff.

### Darkness

The darkness that shrouds Ship-Trap Island accentuates the shadowy recesses that lie beyond the reach of logic and reason. As Whitney and Rainsford converse on the deck of the yacht in the opening passages, the moonless sultry night surrounds them with its "moist black velvet." Disoriented and isolated after falling overboard, Rainsford swims in the direction of the gunshots, the first of many such times on the island when he must rely on other senses to navigate the pitch-blackness that surrounds him. The darkness that envelops the island not only instills foreboding terror, but it also hints at the dementia that has led Zaroff to hunt people. Interestingly, Connell contrasts this darkness with false beacons of light that draw unsuspecting victims to the island like moths to a flame. Rainsford, for example, heads toward the "glaring golden light" of Zaroff's chateau soon after awaking on the island. Similarly, the electric lights lining the channel to Ship-Trap Island appear to warn passing ships of the treacherous shoals and rocks, but they actually shipwreck more sailors for Zaroff to hunt. As a result, these false beacons only make the prevailing darkness more penetrating and foreboding.

## Symbols

### The Jungle

Teeming, wild, and ungovernable, the jungle serves as a powerful symbol of Zaroff's tangled psyche and the chaos within the island. The "snarled and ragged" growth shrouds the island, concealing Zaroff's grotesque hunt from the rest of the world. The jungle is also an emblem of restriction and Rainsford's loss of control because it impedes his effort to return to civilization. The morning he awakens on the island's shore, for example, he can see no way through the tangled of trees and undergrowth before him. During the hunt, claustrophobia overtakes him as Zaroff closes in for the kill. Ultimately, Rainsford must free himself from this thorny physical and mental space and does so by rejecting the jungle altogether in favor of the sea.

## The Island

Ship-Trap Island symbolizes a similarly uncharted region where the laws governing normal human discourse don't exist. Here, General Zaroff's plays out his homicidal whims unchecked, unimpeded, and a world apart from Rainsford's comfortable life of privilege and ease. In many ways, the island is an antiutopian society under the rule of a tyrant seeking to exterminate other people instead of sustaining them. The autocratic Zaroff, without any compassion or regard for human life, exerts absolute control over everything. Isolated, the island is a realm of wild, uncontrollable, and unspeakable desires recklessly pursued without any sense of morality. Subject to legend and superstition, the island is an unconscious embodiment of fear, abstract and impalpable, just like the chill and shudder that Whitney feels as the yacht first sails by.

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## Historical Context

General Zaroff's Cossack background adds historical realism to the nightmarish hunt on Ship-Trap Island. *Cossack* is the general name given to a number of peoples in the Ural Mountains region of Eastern Europe in present-day Russia and the Ukraine. Many Russian Cossacks, such as Zaroff and his assistant, Ivan, were military specialists who fought for centuries as mercenary soldiers in service to the czar until the collapse of the Russian empire in 1917. The Cossacks played a crucial role in expanding Russia's borders and maintaining order along the frontier. Deeply feared, Cossacks were infamous for their swift and violent attacks and use of guerilla warfare tactics. Although Connell had no intention of promoting stereotypes in his story, he nevertheless wanted to capitalize on the mythic violence of Cossack warfare to heighten dramatic tension and expose the calculated madness of a single monstrous persona. Connell's extreme portrayal of the Cossacks thus provides a credible explanation for Zaroff's otherwise unfathomable motivations for killing.

Zaroff's Cossack heritage not only highlights his brutality but also foreshadows his doom, as the hunter becomes the hunted. In 1917, the once heavily persecuted Communists seized power after anarchists overthrew the ruling czar and the entire feudal system in the Russian Revolution. The newly empowered Soviets turned against the feared Cossacks and tried to exterminate them in a ruthless ethnic cleansing campaign. Zaroff briefly mentions the genocidal campaign to Rainsford, which he uses to explain his departure from the Crimea and subsequent retreat to the remote Ship-Trap Island. Like his Cossack brethren, however, Zaroff too finds himself trapped when Rainsford turns the tables on him in the final climatic scene, reversing the roles of predator and prey.

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## The Serial Gothic Adventure

Connell weaves elements of Gothic fiction with the adventure serial genre to create a fun and fast-paced yet darkly probing story. The Gothic elements in "The Most Dangerous Game" add to the story's mysterious and suspenseful mood to expose the dark underside of the human psyche. In keeping with the Gothic tradition, Connell weaves the bizarre, grotesque, frightening, and unexpected into his story. The ominous Ship-Trap Island, for example, looms menacingly from the beginning of the story as a place that all sailors fear and avoid. Forbidding sounds such as gunfire and high-pitched cries then pierce the night, sending eerie chills down Rainsford's spine. The darkness and the jungle add to this feeling, as do the blood-stained weeds, the hidden fortress, Ivan's brooding presence, and the coldly calculating General Zaroff. These elements, among many others, build tension and pave the way for the shocking revelation that Zaroff kills people for sport on his island.

Combining these Gothic elements with the serial adventure genre ratchets the suspense even higher and adds to the sense of animalistic panic that all prey feel as a predator draws nearer. The jungle, chase, fashioning of traps, near escapes, and great white hunter taken out of his element and with the odds against him all help to expand the scope of the story and contribute to its increasingly breathless pace. Elements of the traditional, "literary" short story, such as the preoccupation with self-actualization and personal struggle, are still present, particularly in Connell's central concern with the nature of humanity and the interplay of instinct and reason. These elements highlight the story's seriousness and exploration of fear and death, but Rainsford's journey remains primarily a physical one and less emotional or philosophical. In fact, readers remain uncertain at the end about whether Rainsford truly learns from his experience on the island after finally killing Zaroff.