**The Most Dangerous Game Summary**

"[The Most Dangerous Game](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-most-dangerous-game/)" opens with a conversation between two men, [Whitney](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=41713) and Rainsford. The pair are on a yacht headed to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At the time of the story, they find themselves somewhere in the Caribbean. Both men are aficionados of big-game hunting. They discuss the ability of an animal to understand a hunt. Rainsford believes that animals are incapable of feeling or understanding any human emotion.

Shortly after their discussion, Whitney retires for the evening. Rainsford decides to stay on deck to smoke his pipe. He suddenly hears the sound of gunshots and in his attempt to see the source of the sound, he falls into the water. After a brief moment of panic, Rainsford rallies and decides to swim toward the source of the gunshots. When he finally makes it ashore, he falls asleep.

The next morning he decides to investigate his surroundings. He finds a pool of blood and surmises that it is from the prey that was shot the night before. Near the blood he sees the footprints of hunting boots. He elects to follow them. After a long hike Rainsford arrives at a palatial estate. He is greeted at the door by a large man wielding a gun. A second man enters and explains that his assistant, [Ivan](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=41709), is deaf and dumb. The man is dressed elegantly and has an air of sophistication about him. He introduces himself as [General Zaroff](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=41707).

Zaroff is familiar with Rainsford's book on hunting snow leopards. After getting settled, Rainsford and Zaroff dine together and discuss the merits of hunting. It is during this conversation that Rainsford learns that Zaroff hunts men on the island. As a result of becoming bored with the available game in the world, Zaroff has turned to hunting those that can reason and present a greater challenge. Rainsford is horrified by Zaroff's revelation. Zaroff invites Rainsford to hunt with him but Rainsford declines citing exhaustion.

That night Rainsford is unable to sleep. The next day he learns that he is either to serve as Zaroff's newest prey or fall into the burly, violent hands of Ivan. He elects the former and immediately sets off into the jungle. After a few hours of zigzagging through the dense jungle, he climbs a tree to hide from his adversary. Incredibly, despite the elusive trail, Zaroff is able to easily find Rainsford. However, in order to prolong the fun of the game, Zaroff leaves Rainsford without harming him.

Rainsford panics and is subject to a few other encounters with Zaroff. Each time he gets closer and closer to defeating his foe through the use of primitive traps. Unfortunately, he is unable to trap his pursuer. He does manage to kill one of Zaroff's prized dogs and Ivan. In the final chase, Rainsford dives off the edge of the cliff into the ocean. Zaroff is disappointed to have lost his worthy adversary and returns to his house crestfallen.

After a hearty meal and much reminiscing of the day's events, Zaroff decides to retire for the evening. Upon entering his bedroom, he is confronted by Rainsford, who has been hiding behind the bed curtains. Zaroff is delighted that he has been defeated. However, Rainsford is not willing to let the game end there. He challenges Zaroff to one final duel. Zaroff accepts and says that whoever loses shall be fed to the dogs, and the winner would sleep in Zaroff's bed. The story ends with an indirect ending-- Rainsford cites that he had never slept in a better bed.

Plot Overview

[→](http://www.sparknotes.com/short-stories/the-most-dangerous-game/characters.html)

### Context

### Character List

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.

Character List

[→](http://www.sparknotes.com/short-stories/the-most-dangerous-game/canalysis.html)

### Plot Overview

### Analysis of Major Characters

**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.

Read an [in-depth analysis of Sanger Rainsford.](http://www.sparknotes.com/short-stories/the-most-dangerous-game/canalysis.html#Sanger-Rainsford)

**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.

Read an [in-depth analysis of General Zaroff.](http://www.sparknotes.com/short-stories/the-most-dangerous-game/canalysis.html#General-Zaroff)

**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.

#### Themes

##### Reason versus Instinct

Pitting Rainsford and General Zaroff against each other in the hunt allows Connell to blur the line between hunter and prey, human and animal, to suggest that instinct and reason 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 lead 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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Study Guide Prepared by Michael J. Cummings...© 2008

**Type of Work and Year of Publication**

“The Most Dangerous Game” is short story of adventure and suspense that conveys a serious message. It was published in *Collier's* magazine on January 19, 1924. It won Richard Connell his second O. Henry Award for short fiction.

**The Title: a Double Meaning**

The word *game* in the title of the story has two meanings: (1) human beings as Zaroff's quarry and (2) the competition, or game, between the hunter (Zaroff) and the hunted (Rainsford and other human quarry).

**Setting**

The action takes place shortly after the First World War. The story opens in the Caribbean on a Brazil-bound yacht and continues on a mysterious Caribbean island.

**Characters**

**Sanger Rainsford**: American big-game hunter and author who saw action in France in the First World War. He exhibits no pity or sympathy for the animals he hunts. Then, ironically, he himself becomes a hunted animal after he arrives on a mysterious island. Rainsford is the story's protagonist, or main character. Whether his experience on the island changes his attitude toward hunted animals is open to question.
**General Zaroff**: Russian big-game hunter from an aristocratic family in the Crimea, a Ukraine peninsula that was part of Russia until recent times. Zaroff is bored with killing typical game such as tigers, elephants, asnd water buffalo. Instead, he hunts the ultimate trophy animal: man. Zaroff, a Cossack, commanded a cavalry division in the Russian army until the bolsheviks revolted in 1917 and installed a communist government that abolished aristocracy and the class system. Zaroff went off then and established a new world for himself on a remote Caribbean island. There he maintains his aristocratic lifestyle in his palatial home while pursuing his barbaric hobby. One might call him a civilized savage.
**Whitney**: Hunting partner of Rainsford.
**Ivan**: Zaroff's Russian servant and hunting partner. Like Zaroff, he is a Cossack. Ivan is a giant, the biggest man Rainsford has ever seen. Because he is a deaf mute, Ivan hears no evil and speaks no evil but simply does Zaroff's bidding.
**Neilsen**: Captain of the yacht taking Rainsford and Whitney to Brazil. He is referred to but plays no active role in the story.
**Crewmen of the *San Lucar*:** Shipwrecked sailors held captive in Zaroff's cellar. The general plans to use them as quarry. They play no active role in the story.

**Plot Summary**

By Michael J. Cummings...© 2008

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It is late evening. Two big-game hunters, Whitney and Rainsford, survey the Caribbean from a yacht bound for Brazil. Whitney points to the right, to the location of a mysterious island.

“Sailors have a curious dread of the place, Whitney says. “I don’t know why. Some superstition—”

Because the night is moonless, neither man can see the island, about four miles away.

After arriving in Brazil, the two men are scheduled to travel up the Amazon for jaguar hunting.

“The best sport in the world,” Rainsford says.

“For the hunter, not the jaguar,” Whitney replies.

"Don't talk rot, Whitney. You're a big-game hunter, not a philosopher. Who cares how a jaguar feels."

When their conversation returns to the nearby island, Rainsford asks whether its bad reputation is due to cannibals. Whitney says even they would not live in the place, which is called Ship-Trap Island. “But it’s gotten into sailor lore, somehow,” he says, pointing out [](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/redirect?tag=cummingsstudyguides_net-20&creative=374725&camp=211173&link_code=ur1&path=subst/home/home.html)that the ship’s crew has been nervous all day about coming so near it. Even Captain Neilsen, a tough old Swede, is jumpy.

After the men say good night, Rainsford smokes a pipe in a lounge chair on the afterdeck. Suddenly, he hears gunfire from the direction of the island. Three shots. Rainsford jumps up for a look. Unable to see anything, he climbs onto the rail for a better view. His pipe strikes a rope and falls from his mouth. When he reaches for it, he loses his balance and plunges into the sea. Water fills his mouth when he tries to cry out. After ripping off his clothes, he swims for the yacht and shouts, but it speeds ahead and in a few moments disappears.

The shots. Rainsford begins swimming in the direction from which they came. On and on he swims. At length, he hears an anguished cry, then another shot—a pistol shot, he believes. After ten more minutes of swimming, he reaches the shore. Dense jungle lies before him. Exhausted, he tumbles down, falls asleep, and does not awaken till the afternoon of the next day. He is refreshed but hungry. Walking along the shore, he stops at a patch of crushed underbrush. There is blood, and he finds an empty cartridge and the footprints of the hunter. He follows them along a cliff. As darkness settles over the island, he sees lights on top of a bluff. To his astonishment, they are coming from a majestic château with pointed towers.

He opens a tall iron gate, climbs stone steps, and lifts and drops the knocker on the door two times before a gigantic man, bearded to the waist, answers. He is pointing a revolver at his visitor, who identifies himself as Sanger Rainsford of New York City and says he fell off a yacht and needs food. Another man in evening clothes comes to the door and says it is a great honor to welcome such a celebrated hunter as Rainsford.

He notes that he has read Rainsford’s book on hunting the snow leopards of Tibet, then introduces himself as General Zaroff. He is tall and handsome, with white hair and a mustache. Zaroff motions to the giant, who is deaf and dumb, to put away his weapon. Both men are Russian Cossacks. After receiving instructions from Zaroff, the big man, called Ivan, takes Rainsford to a large bedroom and outfits him with clothes, then escorts him to an oak-paneled dining room. On the walls are mounted heads of lions, elephants, moose, cape buffalo, and other big game—all outstanding specimens. Elegant china, silver, crystal, and linens grace the table at which Zaroff and Rainsford drink champagne and eat borsch and filet mignon. When Zaroff says hunting is the passion of his life, Rainsford observes that he has always believed the cape buffalo to be the most dangerous big game. Zaroff tells him he is wrong, saying that he hunts “more dangerous game” on the island.

They enjoy another drink as the general tells Rainsford about his hunting days as a child on his father’s lands in the Crimea and about his military service as commander of a division of Cossack cavalry. He also says he has hunted in America, India, East Africa, and South America. Because hunting big game eventually became too easy for him, posing no challenge, he decided to find a new animal to hunt. After he found it, he bought the island, built the château, and dedicated himself to hunting the new beast in the island’s jungles. It is an animal that can reason, Zaroff says.

When Rainsford says animals cannot reason, Zaroff says that “there is one that can.”

Rainsford now realizes that his host hunts and kills humans. Shocked, he says, “Great guns, General Zaroff, what you speak of is murder.”
Zaroff laughs and says, "I refuse to believe that so modern and civilized a young man as you seem to be harboring romantic ideas about the value of human life. Surely your experiences in the war—"

Rainsford finishes Zaroff's sentence: "Did not make me condone cold-blooded murder."

"I'll wager you'll forget your notions when you go hunting with me," Zaroff says. "You've a genuine new thrill in store for you, Mr. Rainsford."

“Thank you, I’m a hunter, not a murderer,” Rainsford says.

In an apparent attempt to justify his pastime, Zaroff says he usually hunts only the “scum of the earth: sailors from tramp ships—lassars, blacks, Chinese, whites, mongrels.” He uses a small-caliber pistol. At a window, he presses a button that turns on lights out at sea, indicating a channel where there are actually jagged rocks. When a ship steers toward the lights, the rocks wreck it and Zaroff harvests surviving crewmen for his hunts. At that very moment, a dozen men from a small Spanish ship, the *San Lucar*, are in his cellar.

Zaroff provides his quarry food, a hunting knife, and a three-hour start before beginning his pursuit. If the quarry survives three days, he wins the game. If Zaroff finds the quarry before the end of three days, the quarry dies. Zaroff says he never lost a game, although he had to loose his dogs on a man who almost eluded him. Anyone who refuses to participate in the game is turned over to Ivan for sport of a different kind. He notes that Ivan, besides being incredibly strong, is an expert at handling the whip as a flogging instrument.

“Invariably, Mr. Rainsford, “they choose the hunt,” Zaroff says.

His dogs prowl the grounds in the evening and through the night to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the château.

After inviting Rainsford to hunt with him the next day, Zaroff suggests that his guest get a good night’s sleep. Zaroff himself will not be sleeping; he will be hunting.
Though tired, Rainsford has trouble falling asleep. Toward morning, he dozes off but awakens a short while later when he hears gunfire in the distance.

At a luncheon later, Zaroff says his nocturnal hunt was disappointing, for his quarry was too easy to find. When Rainsford expresses a wish to leave the island, Zaroff informs him that he will be the next quarry. If he wins the game, Zaroff says, a sloop will take Rainsford back to civilization. Because Rainsford is outnumbered and has no weapons, he has no choice but to take part in the game.

After Zaroff advises him to avoid a swamp with quicksand in the southeast corner of the island, Ivan brings Rainsford hunting clothes, moccasins, a knife, and a sack of food. Zaroff will not follow until the evening.

In the bush, Rainsford tries to put the greatest possible distance between himself and Zaroff. However, after two hours, he realizes his strategy would only take him to the sea. So he runs a trail full of twists and turns. At night, he climbs a tree and rests on a branch, although he does not sleep.

Near morning, the cry of a bird alerts him to movement in the bush. Peering down through thick leaves, he sees Zaroff examining the ground. When the general’s eyes travel “inch by inch up the tree” Rainsford holds his breath. Zaroff then lowers his eyes, smiles, and turns back. Rainsford exhales and wonders why the general smiled. After climbing down, he walks three yards to a dead tree leaning against another tree. Working quickly with his knife, he sets a trap, then hides behind a log.

Zaroff returns, following Rainsford’s trail of crushed grass and broken twigs. When he comes into contact with the trap, he jumps backward, sensing danger, but not far enough. The dead tree swings out and strikes him on the shoulder. The general recovers and congratulates Rainsford for knowing how to make a Malay mancatcher. He says he is leaving to treat his injured shoulder—but will be back.

Rainsford continues to plod through the bush, even when it is dark, until he steps in quicksand. With a mighty pull, he free his foot. Backing up about four yards, he digs a pit shoulder-high. Then he makes sharpened stakes from saplings, plants them in the pit, covers the pit with brush and weeds, and hides behind a stump.

By and by, Rainsford hears Zaroff approaching and even smells the breeze-blown smoke of his cigarette. A moment later, he hears the brush cover on the pit give way, followed by a cry of pain. But as springs from his hiding place, he sees Zaroff standing back from the pit with a portable lighting device. In the pit is one of his dogs. Zaroff says, “I think, Mr. Rainsford, I’ll see what you can do against my whole pack. I'm going home for a rest now. Thank you for a most amusing evening."

At dawn, Rainsford hears the faint sound of barking dogs. He climbs a tree on a ridge and sees Zaroff. With him is Ivan, pulled along by the dogs on a leash. After sliding down the tree, Rainsford sets another trap: a knife affixed to the top of a sapling drawn back and tied down with grapevine. Movement releases the sapling and whips the knife forward. Rainsford then runs for his life.

A short while later, the barking ceases. Something has happened, Rainsford thinks. Again he climbs a tree to view his pursuers. Zaroff stands but Ivan is down, a victim of the trap. Rainsford shinnies down the tree, runs, and arrives at a precipice about twenty feet above the sea. He jumps.

When Zaroff reaches the precipice with the dogs, he shrugs, sits down, swigs brandy from a flask, and hums music from Puccini’s opera, *Madame Butterfly*.
That evening, Zaroff eats a good dinner, laments the loss of Ivan, regrets the escape of Rainsford, reads from Marcus Aurelius in his library, and goes to his bedroom.

There, he is surprised to see Rainsford, who had swum back to the château.

"I am still a beast at bay," Rainsford says. "Get ready, General Zaroff."

The general bows and says, "I see. 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.

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**Theme: Inhumanity**

At the beginning of the story, Rainsford exhibits a hardhearted attitude toward the animals he hunts. His conversation with Whitney aboard the yacht reveals his feelings—or lack of them—about hunting big game:

Whitney: Great sport, hunting.
Rainsford: The best sport in the world.
Whitney: For the hunter, not the jaguar.
Rainsford: Don't talk rot, Whitney. You're a big-game hunter, not a philosopher. Who cares how a jaguar feels.
Whitney: Perhaps the jaguar does.
Rainsford: Bah! They’ve no understanding.
Whitney: Even so—I rather think they understand one thing—fear. The fear of pain and the fear of death
Rainsford: Nonsense. This hot weather is making you soft, Whitney. Be a realist. The world is made up of two classes—the hunters and the huntees.

After Rainsford falls overboard and swims to General Zaroff’s island, Zaroff exhibits the same kind of callousness toward his favorite prey. But in Zaroff's case the prey is human. Shipwrecks that Zaroff causes provide him a constant supply of "game." Shocked, Rainsford expresses moral indignation at the general’s murderous pastime. Zaroff counters that Rainsford will change his mind when he participates in a hunt. But what Rainsford does not immediately realize is that he will be the quarry.
After Zaroff releases Rainsford into the jungle the next day, Rainsford becomes like the animals he hunts, mere game, and no doubt begins to appreciate what Whitney had told him aboard the ship about the inhumanity of hunting frightened animals.
After Rainsford sets traps that kill one of Zaroff’s tracking dogs and Zaroff’s gigantic sidekick, Ivan, he escapes his pursuers by jumping into the ocean from a precipice. That evening when Zaroff goes to bed, Rainsford comes from behind a curtain and confronts the general, saying, “I am still a beast at bay.” And the beast then kills the hunter and sleeps soundly in his bed.
Rainsford has graduated to killing a human. The question now is this: Has Rainsford become another Zaroff?
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**Vocabulary**

**borsch**: Russian beet soup. Also called borscht.
**château**: Large dwelling resembling a castle.
**Caucasus**: Mountain range running southeast from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea.
**Cossack**: Russian or Pole skilled at horsemanship.
**Crimea**: Ukraine peninsula that was part of Russia until recent times.
**Folies-Bergère**: Paris music hall famous for presenting operettas, pantomimes, musical comedies, acrobatic acts, and vaudeville.
**Ganges**: River in northern India.
**knouter**: One skilled at flogging.
**lassar**: Corrupt spelling of *lascar*, a sailor from India or Southeast Asia serving aboard a European ship.
**Madame Butterfly**: Tragic opera by Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924).
**Malay**: (1) Adjective referring to inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula, which includes Malaysia and part of Thailand; (2) noun designating an inhabitant of the Malay Peninsula.
**Marcus Aurelius**: Roman emperor from AD 160-180.
**Monte Carlo**: Tourist resort and gambling Mecca in Monaco on the Mediterranean coast of Southern France.
**Tartar**: Violent person hard to control.
**yacht**: Small sailboat.

**Who Wins the Game?**

It appears that Rainsford wins the game. However, close examination of the ending leaves the question open. The key sentence to consider is this one spoken by Rainsford: “I am still a beast at bay.” Referring to himself as a beast may suggest that he has corrupted himself, like Zaroff. After he kills Zaroff—apparently in a knife duel—he sleeps in Zaroff's bed, as if he *is* Zaroff. In losing his life, Zaroff may have won Rainsford's soul.

**Building Suspense**

The success of "The Most Dangerous Game" depends in large part on building suspense. In executing this task, the author wastes no time. In the first fifty words, he establishes the existence of a mysterious island with an ominous name, Ship-Trap Island. Sailors dread it. He then shrouds the island in the "thick warm blackness" of a "moonless Caribbean night," imagery that suggests hidden evil. A few paragraphs later, the main character, Rainsford, hears a gunshot coming from the direction of the island, falls overboard while standing on the ship rail to look for the source of the shot, and swims to the island, where he finds thick jungle and, of all things, a splendid château on a bluff. At the château, the first person to greet Rainsford is a giant, the biggest man Rainsford had ever seen. What happens next? That is the question the author wants the reader to ask as he unfolds his tale.

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**Study Questions and Essay Topics**

1. Do you believe the author of "The Most Dangerous Game" intended the story partly as an indictment of hunting or cruelty to animals?
2. Write an essay comparing and contrasting Rainsford and Zaroff.
3. What purpose does Whitney serve in the story?
4. Why did Zaroff leave Russia?
5. Write a short psychological profile of Rainsford or Zaroff.
6. Islands are often presented in world literature as mysterious or foreboding places. Write an essay discussing how other authors use island settings to develop their themes. Examples of stories in which action takes place on islands are Homer's [*Odyssey*](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides2/Odyssey.html), William Golding's [*Lord of the Flies*](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides2/Golding.html), Daniel Defoe's [*Robinson Crusoe*](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides4/Defoe.html), and William Shakespeare's [*The Tempest*](http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xTempest.html).