The Most Dangerous Game

Richard Connell

1924

"The Most Dangerous Game," an adventure tale that pits two notorious hunters against one another in a life-and-death competition, is the story for which Richard Connell is best remembered. First published in 1924, the story has been frequently anthologized as a classic example of a suspenseful narrative loaded with action. Connell's story raises questions about the nature of violence and cruelty and the ethics of hunting for sport.

"The Most Dangerous Game" gained favorable recognition upon its initial publication in 1924, winning the prestigious O. Henry Memorial Award for short fiction. Its popularity was further established when the first film version of the story was produced in 1932. Alternately known as *The Most Dangerous Game* and *The Hounds of Zaroff,* the film tampered notably with Connell's plot, particularly in the introduction of a female character. The story's theme, that of the hunter becoming the hunted, has become a popular one in other books and films since Connell's version appeared.

Author Biography

Richard Connell was a prolific writer in the first several decades of the twentieth century. He was born October 17, 1893, in a New York state community near the Hudson River, not far from Theodore Roosevelt's homestead. He started his writing ca-

reer early, working as a reporter for the Poughkeepsie *News-Press* while still in high school. He spent a year at Georgetown College (now University) in Washington, D.C. while working as a secretary for his father, who was a member of Congress. When his father died in 1912, Connell moved back East to attend Harvard University. There he exercised his interest in writing by serving as an editor for both the *Daily Crimson* and the *Lampoon*, a precursor to the popular *National Lampoon* satire magazine. Around this time he also worked as a reporter for the *New York American* newspaper and served in World War I.

Throughout his career, Connell variously wrote novels, plays, short stories, and screenplays for Hollywood movies. Among the screenplays he wrote are *Seven Faces* and *Brother Orchid*, a mob tale starring Edward G. Robinson and Humphrey Bogart. Most of Connell's fiction was published in the 1920s and 1930s, including the novels *Mad Lover*, *Playboy*, and *What Ho!* He was a prolific fiction writer. His stories, more than 300 in all, were frequently published in such popular magazines as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Colliers*. Many of these were later published in collections, including *The Sin of Monsieur Petipon* in 1922, *Apes and Angels* in 1924, and *Ironies* in 1930.

Some of these collections met with mixed reviews from critics. In 1925, a reviewer for the *New York Times* commented that his collection of stories titled *Variety* "ranks, though high, in the great army of the second-rate." "The Most Dangerous Game," however, has remained popular since its initial publication. One of its strengths is its finely crafted action, which provides a type of suspense and adventure rare in short fiction. Connell died of a heart attack in Beverly Hills, California, on November 22, 1949.

Plot Summary

The celebrated hunter Sanger Rainsford, while aboard a yacht cruising in the Caribbean, falls into the sea. While swimming desperately for shore, he hears the anguished cries of an animal being hunted; it is an animal he does not recognize. Rainsford makes it to land and after sleeping on the beach, he begins to look for people on the island. He finds evidence of the hunt he overheard and wonders, upon finding empty cartridges, why anyone would use a small gun to hunt what was, according to the evidence, obviously a large animal. Rainsford then follows the hunter's footprints to the solitary house on the island.

The mansion looms above him like something out of a Gothic novel and inside is a similarly Gothic character as well: Ivan, a gigantic, mute man. Ivan is about to shoot Rainsford when the entry of another man stops him. The second man, General Zaroff, is far more civilized looking than Ivan and has exquisite manners. He apologizes for Ivan and gives Rainsford clean clothes and dinner. While the men are eating, Zaroff reveals his passion for the hunt. He tells Rainsford he hunts "big game" on the island—game he has imported. Hunting had ceased to be a challenge to Zaroff, so he decided to hunt a new animal, one that could reason. Rainsford realizes with horror that Zaroff actually hunts humans and wonders what happens if a man refuses to be hunted. He finds there is no refusing Zaroff, for either a man goes on the hunt or he is turned over to the brutish Ivan. Zaroff never loses. Although Rainsford passes the night in comfortable quarters, he has trouble sleeping. As he finally dozes off, he hears a pistol shot in the jungle.

The next day Rainsford demands to leave the island. Zaroff protests that they have not gone hunting yet, then informs Rainsford that he, in fact, is to be hunted. Zaroff tells him that if he survives three days in the jungle, he will be returned to the mainland, but he must tell no one of Zaroff's hunt. With no real choice, Rainsford accepts his supplies from Ivan and leaves the chateau. He has a three-hour head start and is determined to outsmart Zaroff. He doubles back on his trail numerous times until he feels that even Zaroff cannot follow his path. Then he hides in a tree for rest. Zaroff, however, comes right to him but chooses not to look up in the tree and find him. Rainsford realizes Zaroff is playing a game of cat and mouse with him. After Zaroff has walked off, Rainsford steels his nerve and moves on.

Rainsford decides to set a trap for Zaroff. If Zaroff trips it, a dead tree will fall on him. Soon Zaroff's foot sets off the trap, but he leaps back and only his shoulder is injured. He congratulates Rainsford and tells him he is returning to the chateau to get his wound looked at but will be back. Rainsford flees through the forest. He comes to a patch of quicksand known as Death Swamp where he builds another trap. He fashions a pit with sharp stakes inside and a mat of forest weeds and branches to cover the opening. One of Zaroff's dogs springs the trap, however, and ruins Rainsford's plan.

At daybreak, Rainsford hears a fear-inspiring sound: the baying of Zaroff's hounds. He makes another attempt to save his life. He attaches a knife to a flexible sapling, hoping it will harm Zaroff as he follows the trail. But this too fails; it only kills Ivan. In a fit of desperation, Rainsford looks to his only escape—jumping off the cliff into the sea which waits far below. He takes this chance.

That night General Zaroff is back in his mansion. He is annoyed with the thought of having to replace Ivan and he is slightly irked because one of his prey has escaped. He goes up to bed and switches on the light. A man is hiding behind the curtains. It is Rainsford. Zaroff congratulates him on winning the game, but Rainsford informs him that they are still playing. That night, Rainsford sleeps with immense enjoyment in Zaroff's comfortable bed.

Media Adaptations

- "The Most Dangerous Game" was filmed by RKO in 1932. It was directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack and Irving Pichel and produced by David O. Selznick and Meriam C. Cooper. It starred Joel McCrea as Rainsford, Leslie Banks as General Zaroff, and co-starred Fay Wray and Robert Armstrong. Also known as *The Most Dangerous Game in the World* and *The Hounds of Zaroff.* 65 minutes, available on video.

Characters

Ivan

Ivan is the deaf and dumb assistant to General Zaroff. He is extremely large and seems to enjoy torturing and murdering helpless captives. Indeed, Zaroff uses the threat of turning his huntees over to Ivan if they will not comply with his desire to hunt them; the huntees invariably choose to be hunted rather than face the brutal Ivan. Ivan, like Zaroff, is a Cossack—a Russian who served as a soldier to the Russian Czar in the early 1900s. Ivan dies as the result of one of Rainsford's traps.

Sanger Rainsford

After hearing gunshots in the darkness, Sanger Rainsford falls off a yacht into the Caribbean Sea. "It was not the first time he had been in a tight place," however. Rainsford is an American hunter of world renown, and is immediately recognized by General Zaroff as the author of a book on hunting snow leopards in Tibet. While he shares both an interest in hunting and a refined nature with Zaroff, Rainsford believes Zaroff's sport to be brutal and Zaroff himself to be a murderer. As the object of the hunt, Rainsford constantly attempts to preserve his "nerve" and uses his knowledge of hunting and trapping to elude Zaroff. Rainsford becomes terrified, however, as Zaroff outwits him (but allows him to live) and toys with him as if he were a mouse. Having already killed Zaroff's assistant, Ivan, and one of Zaroff's dogs, Rainsford surprises Zaroff in his bedroom. Rainsford refuses to end the game there, however, and kills Zaroff. Rainsford then spends a comfortable night in Zaroff's bed, which raises the question of whether he will simply replace the evil Zaroff.

General Zaroff

General Zaroff greets the stranded Rainsford by sparing his life, but later hunts him and attempts to kill him. Zaroff is distinguished by a "cultivated voice," fine clothes, the "singularly handsome" features of an aristocrat—and an obsession for hunting human beings. He has established a "palatial chateau" in which he lives like royalty with his servant Ivan, his hunting dogs, and his stock of prey—the poor sailors unlucky enough to end up on the island. Zaroff's decoy lights indicate "a channel . . . where there is none" and cause ships to crash into the rocks off the coast of his island. He captures the shipwrecked sailors and forces them to play his game or be tortured and killed by Ivan. Zaroff toys with Rainsford, declining to murder him three times to prolong the game. To him, the life and death struggle is little more than a game and, while insulting Rainsford's morality, he asserts that his embrace of human killing for sport is very modern, even civilized. Zaroff, like Ivan, is a Cossack and "like all his race, a bit of a savage"; yet he also claims a past as a high-ranking officer for the former Tsar of Russia. Zaroff's refined manners, and poised and delicate speech contrast with his brutal passion.

Themes

Rainsford, a noted hunter, falls off a ship and swims to a foreboding island. He finds there the evil General Zaroff who, with the help of his brutish assistant, hunts humans for sport. After three days of fighting for his life in the jungle while Zaroff hunts him, Rainsford surprises Zaroff and kills him. At the story's end, it is not clear if Rainsford will leave the island or take Zaroff's place.

Violence and Cruelty

Essentially an action-packed thriller, Richard Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" builds around explosions of violence. The violence of his malicious host, General Zaroff, initially shocks Rainsford, but as he fights to stay alive he becomes caught up in Zaroff's game. Zaroff attempts to justify his violence with "civilized" arguments. He poses as a modern rationalist and argues against "romantic ideas about the value of human life" and then scolds Rainsford for being "extraordinarily droll" in his response. Zaroff continually defends his murderous desires as the sophisticated and rational extension of hunting animals.

Issues of violence and cruelty in "The Most Dangerous Game" exist not only on a literal level but on a symbolic level as well. As Connell directs the reader to sympathize with Rainsford, the reader feels what it is like to be a hunted animal. Zaroff shows off his animal heads and after describing his new prey, he refers to his "new collection of heads," which are supposedly human. This comparison of decapitated heads opens up parallels between the murder of humans and the murder of animals. If hunting humans for kicks is murder, Connell asks, then how does this differ from hunting animals?

The story also stimulates an array of questions surrounding the nature of violence. Zaroff seems to enjoy violence intensely and thoroughly. Rainsford himself is a hunter of considerable fame. Indeed, Connell structures the entire story around violence and implicates readers through their involvement in the story. Just as the story is ostensibly about a man who enjoys killing, the story's success rests on the reader's capacity to enjoy the violence of the plot. As stressed in the title, the reader receives the vicarious experience of risk and danger. Connell mixes violence and cruelty with pleasure to engage the reader and make a statement at the same time.

Revenge

The conclusion of "The Most Dangerous Game" inspires many questions, including: Has Rainsford become a murderer just like General Zaroff? How has he changed, and why? Although he won the game, and General Zaroff appeared ready to set him free, Rainsford still killed Zaroff. Zaroff's murder, therefore, is not self defense, as it would have been before Rainsford won the game. It is either an act of revenge or a killing for sport.

When he first learns of Zaroff's sport, Rainsford is horrified. Yet, during the game he kills the dog and Ivan and does not indicate remorse. Connell thus opens up the possibility that playing the game changes Rainsford. He does not set the other "prey" free as soon as he murders Zaroff. Does he intend to free them, or does his pleasant night's rest indicate a desire to stay on the island? Will he merely replace General Zaroff? Sparing Zaroff could have brought the opportunity for authorities to prosecute Zaroff for his crimes, but Rainsford resorted to the violence he initially abhorred.

Style

Setting

"The Most Dangerous Game," a gripping tale that pits man versus man in a South American jungle, includes elements that recall several literary genres, including Gothic, action-adventure, and horror.

In "The Most Dangerous Game," Richard Connell provides an ominous setting typical of the Gothic genre. Horrible sounds and dismal sights fill the background of this story, and the details become more frightening and typical of both the horror and action-adventure genres as the story progresses. When he falls off the yacht, Rainsford immediately finds himself in the "blood warm waters of the Caribbean sea"—an indication of worse things to come. He fights through the surf, listening to gunshots and the screams of dying animals he later finds out were humans. Rainsford passes over rocks that he could have "shattered against" only to leave "the enemy, the sea" for "knit webs of weeds and trees." The environment is consistently malicious, dangerous, and unyielding.

At first, Rainsford believes the "lofty structure with pointed towers plunging upwards into the gloom" is a "mirage." The house is not a literal

mirage, but its civilized facade is soon shattered in the ensuing violence. Rainsford encounters many of the foreboding indicators of a haunted mansion: the "tall spiked gate," the "heavy knocker" on the door gate that creaks, and the gigantic scale of the rooms decorated as if in "feudal times." The table large enough for "two score men," and the ominous "mounted heads of many animals—lions, tigers, elephants, moose, bears; larger or more perfect than Rainsford had ever seen" add to the fearful, medieval horror setting. The wild jungle outside, complete with a "Death Swamp," echoes the adventure genre. Connell sets the "game" in a dangerous wilderness of quicksand, wild seas, fallen trees, mud and sand, and rocky cliffs.

Point of View

"The Most Dangerous Game" features an omniscient third-person narrator. The narrator describes things from Rainsford's perspective for most of the story but breaks away toward the end to follow General Zaroff back to his "great paneled dining hall," to his library, and then to his bedroom. A possible reason for this shift in perspective may be that Connell wants to illustrate how the hunter, Zaroff, has become the hunted.

Structure

Connell structures "The Most Dangerous Game" tightly and concisely to complement the story's action. He writes with an often abbreviated style that rapidly moves the reader along through the plot. Twists and turns proceed with little description; this emphasizes those moments when the narrative slows down and tension is generated. The story features a classic device of the horror genre: the moment in which time slows down, and a second seems like an hour. Many words are used to describe a short interval of time, so the reader's experience of time slows down and the moment acquires a greater importance in relation to the remainder of the text. Examples of this include when Rainsworth falls in the water and when he waits for the general in the tree.

In contrast, Connell takes a different approach at the end of the story. Having stretched out intense moments throughout the story, including the involved description of General Zaroff's return, Connell quickly describes the final confrontation. He grants it only a few paragraphs of sparse dialogue before ending the scene abruptly with "He had never slept in a better bed." By describing none of the final battle, Connell stretches the suspense as far as he can. He waits until the last two words of the story to reveal the survivor with: "Rainsford decided."

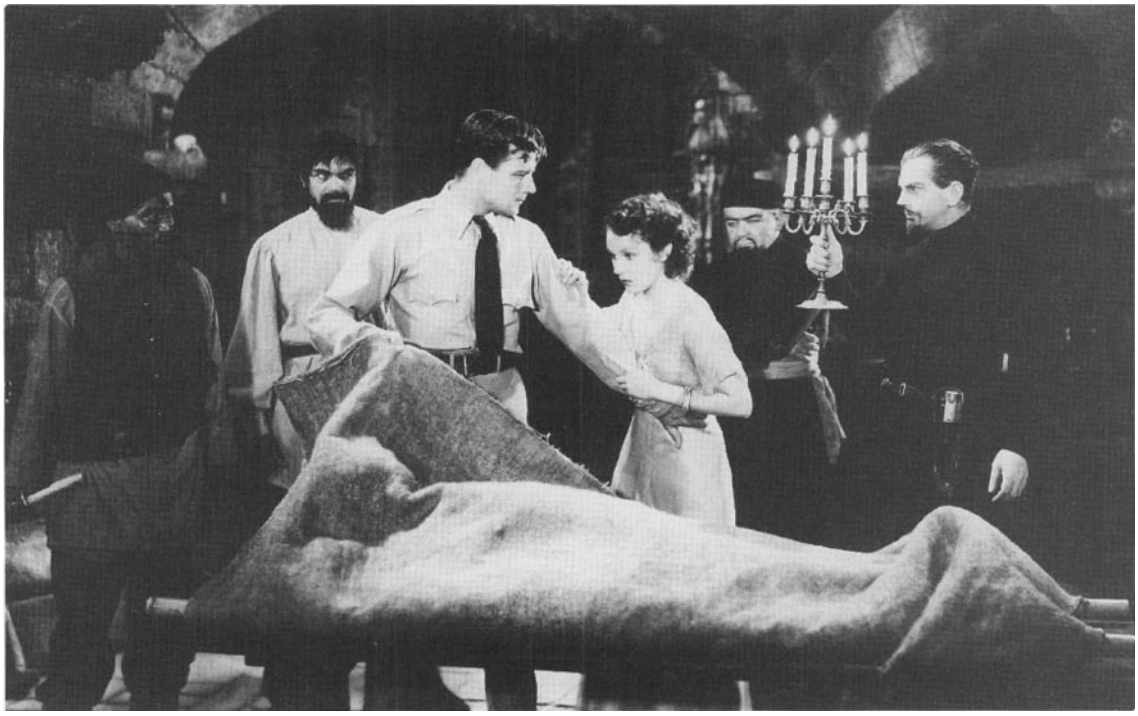
Topics for Further Study

- How does the author make the reader sympathize with Rainsford? How could Connell have written the story to have readers identify instead with General Zaroff?
- After the hunt, do you think Rainsford will become more like General Zaroff? Why or why not?
- When General Zaroff explains his love of hunting to Rainsford, he makes several racist statements. Do you think he does so because of the era in which he lives? Do you think Zaroff's racism reflects the author's own beliefs?

Historical Context

American Interest in Central America and the Caribbean

By 1924, the year "The Most Dangerous Game" was published, the United States was firmly committed to Latin American politics. Military concerns and economic interests, including banking, investments, and the exploitation of natural resources, tied American interests to Latin America and resulted in expansionist legislation. The Platt Amendment of 1901 provided for American intervention in Cuba in case an unstable new government failed to protect life, liberty and property; this was written into Cuba's constitution. In 1905 President Roosevelt urged European nations to keep out of Latin America. He believed the United States was the only nation that should interfere in their politics. This paternal, interventionist attitude was typical of much of the United States's Latin American foreign policy. Such policy, highlighted by the construction of the Panama Canal, created solely for the sake of



A scene from the film version of The Most Dangerous Game.

American shipping and naval power, would continue to influence Latin American politics for decades to come.

Latin Americans have consistently wavered between supporting American foreign policy and rejecting it as intrusive, meddlesome, and overpowering. Indeed, America's and other first-world nations' continuous economic exploitation of Caribbean and Latin American countries has resulted in a crippling dependence on international trade. By often terrifying, scandalous means, Western companies have controlled the economies of relatively underdeveloped nations like Jamaica, thereby insuring their dependence on foreign trade. The economies of such countries have often become entirely dependent on the corporations that have exploited them, which has frequently resulted in mass poverty. The wrecking of native economies and their growing dependence on international conglomerations has spurred the coining of the term, "banana republics." Into these turbulent and contested Caribbean waters, Rainsford falls.

Big Game Hunting in South America

In Connell's era, big-game hunting in South America was done mainly by outfitted safari. The most desired species were jaguar, puma, ocelot, red deer, and buffalo. The jaguar, the most powerful and most feared carnivore in South America, was a prized trophy. It attains a length of eight feet and can weigh up to four hundred pounds. The great cat was hunted primarily with hounds in the forests of Venezuela, Columbia, Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay. In this story, Rainsford and his companions are preparing to hunt jaguar.

Roosevelt and Hunting

Like General Zaroff in Connell's story, President Theodore Roosevelt, who would later found the National Parks System in the United States, was an insatiable hunter. He traveled all over the globe to hunt. On safari in Africa, Roosevelt and his son killed 512 animals, including 17 lions, 11 elephants, 20 rhinoceroses, 9 giraffes, 8 hippopotamuses and 29 zebras. In the story, Zaroff describes similar hunting trips. Whereas Zaroff's most dangerous game was the human, Roosevelt considered the American grizzly bear the most threatening—he was nearly mauled by one while hunting in Wyoming. As a youth, Connell lived near Roosevelt in rural New York in an area near the Hudson River known for its pristine wilderness.

Compare & Contrast

- **1920s:** Big game hunting in African and South American countries is popular with wealthy Europeans and Americans. In 1909, Theodore Roosevelt and his son kill 512 animals on an African safari.

  Today: Most big game hunting in Africa and South America is illegal due to dwindling animal populations. The number of tourists visiting these areas, however, has reached record highs.

- **1920s:** American foreign policy favors intervention in the governmental affairs of Caribbean nations.

  Today: Despite decades of economic embargoes and other tactics on the part of the United States, Cuba remains controlled by Fidel Castro's communist forces. The United States regularly restricts refugees from Cuba and other poverty-stricken and unstable countries from entering the United States.

- **1920s:** The Soviet Union, led by Vladimir Lenin, is established in the aftermath of the Russian Civil War. Private ownership of property and Christianity are banned, and the Cossacks—military forces loyal to the Tzar—are killed or deported. Economic conditions, however, fail to improve on a wide scale.

  Today: The Soviet Union has been dissolved and the Russian president is elected by popular vote. Democratic and capitalistic economic reforms have failed to stem the widespread poverty, inflation, and lack of goods and services that affect the majority of the people.

Bigotry in America

In "The Most Dangerous Game," Zaroff's comments regarding ethnic types reflect the sentiments of anti-immigrant advocates of the time. Zaroff describes his hunting of men to Rainsford and justifies it by saying, "I hunt the scum of the earth-sailors from tramp ships—Lascars, blacks, Chinese, whites, mongrels—a thoroughbred horse or hound is worth more than a score of them." In the 1920s, this attitude was not uncommon among Connell's American audience. Americans whose families had immigrated only decades earlier frequently launched vitriolic attacks against immigrants who were perceived to be inundating the work force and lowering the American standard of living. One writer of the period, Kenneth Roberts, warned that unrestricted immigration would create "a hybrid race of people as worthless and futile as the good-for-nothing mongrels of Central America and Southeastern Europe." Federal dictates began restricting the entrance of immigrants into America. In 1921, Congress set strict quotas for each European country, and the National Origins Act of 1924 reassigned quotas that gave privilege to British, German, and Scandinavian immigrants over Italians, Poles, and Slavs. The 1924 regulations completely restricted the immigration of Asians, Africans, and Hispanics.

Critical Overview

Connell's "The Most Dangerous Game" has thrilled readers since its first publication. In 1924, the year of its release, Connell was awarded the prestigious O. Henry Memorial Award for short fiction. Readers and critics alike have consistently appreciated and enjoyed this story, even as many of Connell's other stories, novels, and collections have fallen out of print. Critics initially praised the story as an excellent action-adventure tale, a tightly told story that moves quickly through a nail-biting plot.

Connell has been praised for the fluidity of his simple writing style and his ability to entertain. In 1925, a reviewer for the *Saturday Review of Literature* found his stories "easy to read, all displaying facility and versatility." The striking originality of

the central idea of "The Most Dangerous Game" —the hunting of humans—has continued to fascinate readers, as reflected in the multiple movie versions of the story and the many collections in which it has been anthologized. Movies and novels indebted to Connell's story include *The Running Man,* a futuristic tale in which convicts bet their lives—they are hunted on a televised game show—to gain their freedom. Critics have also noted that the escapist qualities of "The Most Dangerous Game" have a tendency to overshadow Connell's fine writing.

Criticism

Rena Korb

Rena Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses various elements of "The Most Dangerous Game," including its setting, its Gothic-like description, and the competition between the two main characters.

Richard Connell's short story "The Most Dangerous Game" is fairly well known to American audiences even if his name is not. Connell began writing professionally in 1919 and continued to do so until his death thirty years later. He was a prolific writer, and his more than 300 short stories appeared in such respected American magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Colliers,* and were translated into foreign languages. He was a commercial success, publishing in a span of 15 years four novels and four short-story collections. The *Saturday Review of Literature,* commenting on *Variety,* the collection of stories in which "The Most Dangerous Game" was reprinted, found the stories "easy to read, [with] all displaying facility and versatility."

Several of Connell's early stories were well-received critically—"A Friend of Napoleon" and "The Most Dangerous Game" won the O. Henry Memorial Award for short fiction in 1923 and 1924, respectively. Yet after these first critical successes and despite his ongoing commercial success, Connell never earned much acclaim from his peers. The *New York Times* said of Connell that "the very tricks which have given him a large and remunerative public have continued to rob him of the critical rewards which come to a man of his talents if he devote them to a shrewder and more critical study of the contemporary scene."

Connell began working as a screenwriter in Hollywood in the 1930s. Soon, he was devoting the great majority of his time to that genre and, after 1937, he published no further novels or story collections. Many of his short stories, however, were made into popular movies; "The Most Dangerous Game" was first filmed in 1932. Both the story's action and its ability to function as escapist entertainment are preserved in the film. These elements of the story in particular explain why it has been adapted many times since that first production.

With only two main characters and a straightforward narrative, "The Most Dangerous Game" is basically a spare story. This does not mean, however, that is a simplistic one. Connell's careful work turns a plot that could be deemed unrealistic into a story that compels the reader to breathlessly share Rainsford's life-or-death struggle. One of the qualities of the story that makes the reader aware of its deliberate structure is the opening scene, which uses violent imagery in its language while chronicling the violent events happening off in the distance. Rainsford, while safely aboard the yacht, hears an abrupt sound and then three shots of a gun: this is his introduction to General Zaroff's hunt. As he falls from the boat's railing, he again hears the "cry [that] was pinched off short as the blood-warm waters of the Caribbean Sea closed over his head." Rainsford, now steeped in a metaphorical pool of blood, again hears the cry: "an extremity of anguish and terror." The sea has become a place of violence, and the island, which represents his only chance for safety, promises more of the same.

When Rainsford reaches land, the narrative turns from the more subtle indications of what awaits him to blatant symbols all readers can recognize from horror books and movies. Rainsford's desire to find safety and civilization is so great that he does not fully comprehend the oddity of the island, including the evidence that a hunter has shot a "fairly large animal. . .with a light gun." He doesn't notice what is obvious to the reader: that the island is a place of true Gothic terror. In the "bleak darkness" he comes upon a "palatial chateau" with "pointed towers plunging upwards into the gloom." The mansion is "set on a high bluff and on three sides of it cliffs dived down to where the sea licked greedy lips in the shadows." There is a "tall spiked"

What Do I Read Next?

- *Moby Dick* (1851), Herman Melville's classic adventure novel of a sea captain who hunts his nemesis, the great white whale, Moby Dick.
- *Heart of Darkness* (1902) by Joseph Conrad. A novella about a man, Marlow, who enters the Belgian Congo in order to find Mr. Kurtz, a Western man who has succumbed to the dark forces of the jungle, built a fortress, and generated fear among the natives for his violent, messianic ways.
- "The Bear" (1935) by William Faulkner. A short story in which Ian McCaslin is initiated into adulthood through the annual hunt of Old Ben, an elusive black bear.
- *The Snow Leopard,* by Peter Matthiessen, published in 1978. A National Book Award-winning account of the author's journey with zoologist George Schaller to the Tibetan Plateau in the Himalayan mountains in search of the elusive snow leopard. His journey leads him to the center of Tibetan Buddhism, Crystal Mountain.

gate at the front of the house, and a large door "with a leering gargoyle for a knocker." This is the typical haunted house, with an evil madman lurking inside, as well as dark secrets and a brutish henchman.

Once Rainsford enters General Zaroff's home, the narration becomes subtle again, and it takes Rainsford some time to understand the nature of Zaroff's hunt. The reader, as before, picks up on authorial clues. Zaroff declares that Ivan is "like all his race, a bit of a savage," then confirms that both he and Ivan are Cossacks as "his smile show[s] red lips and pointed teeth." During dinner, Zaroff studies Rainsford, "appraising him narrowly." Zaroff is an obvious predator, toying with Rainsford like a cat plays with a mouse before finishing it off. Once Rainsford discovers that Zaroff hunts humans, Zaroff begins exhibiting more predator-like behavior. When Rainsford asks how he gets his victims, Zaroff demonstrates a button that causes lights to flash far out at sea: "They indicate a channel. . .where there's none." After the ships crash against the rocks, Zaroff simply collects the men who have washed up on the shore.

Zaroff also demonstrates the predatory trait that will dominate his hunt with Rainsford: his delight in keeping his prey dangling until the moment of the kill. Because of the pleasure this brings him, he allows Rainsford to think he is safe, showing him a comfortable bed to sleep in and giving him silk pajamas. Though his decision to hunt Rainsford seems to be a spontaneous decision—"General Zaroff's face suddenly brightened," and he says "This is really an inspiration" —his mind is clearly set on the idea the night before. He had already told Rainsford how he starts the "game": by suggesting to one of his "pupils"—who he has physically trained for the hunt—that they go hunting. Only moments later he says to Rainsford, "Tomorrow, you'll feel like a new man, I'll wager. Then we'll hunt, eh? I've one rather promising prospect—"

Ironically, Zaroff's belief in his invincibility as a hunter weakens him and causes his defeat. Though Zaroff wants to hunt humans because they have the attributes of an ideal quarry— "courage, cunning, and above all, [the ability] to reason" —he underrates these very abilities. He sees them only as necessary to enhance his fun, not as something that could cause a prey to actually escape him. Three times Zaroff chooses not to kill Rainsford, but save him "for another day's sport," taunting him all the while. This cat-and-mouse method, however, comes at a high price. Each time Rainsford fights back, he causes greater damage: first he injures Zaroff; then he kills one of Zaroff's dogs; and finally, right before he escapes from Zaroff by jumping into the ocean, he kills Ivan.

Connell's careful work turns a plot that could be deemed unrealistic into a story that compels the reader to breathlessly share Rainsford's life-or-death struggle."

Zaroff also loses to Rainsford because of their differing perceptions of the rules of the game, and in their differing beliefs as to whether or not the hunt is a game. Zaroff thinks it is; Rainsford doesn't. They both know that Rainsford is playing for his life, but that is the only point on which they agree. Zaroff responds to Rainsford's attempts to trap him as if they were puzzles set out for his amusement. He doesn't recognize that Rainsford is actually trying to kill him and instead delights in identifying the traps— "Not many men know how to make a Malay man-catcher. Luckily for me, I too have hunted in Malacca" —and in seeing which of the men has earned a point— "Again you score," he tells Rainsford. Because it is a game, played according to specific rules, Zaroff would expect Rainsford to adhere to the bargain and return to civilization but never speak of the hunt that takes place on the island. He is such "a gentleman and a sportsman" that he can conceive of no other ending should Rainsford not die at Zaroff's own hands. But Zaroff never realizes that the game Rainsford plays is far more serious and has equally high stakes for both of the men involved. Thus Zaroff's words when he finds Rainsford in his bedroom— "You have won the game" —no longer have any clearly defined meaning. Rainsford, who will triumph, instills in the game rules with a whole new significance. He remains a "beast at bay" until the almost unfathomable occurs: the prey kills the predator.

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

David Kippen

David Kippen is an educator and specialist on British colonial literature and twentieth-century South African fiction. In the following essay, he discusses "The Most Dangerous Game," within the context of the adventure genre. He also explores the similarities and differences between the story's two main characters and what they represent.

As is the case with most authors who make their mark (and livelihood) in the genre of adventure fiction, Richard Connell (1893-1949) deals in easily recognizable stereotypes rather than fully-developed, introspective characters. His primary interest is in crafting fast-paced stories of manly deeds, not [Henry] Jamesian studies of interior life. This being the case, it is not surprising that most of his fiction has disappeared from sight, replaced by more modern treatments of more modern stereotypes. One story, however, "The Most Dangerous Game," has escaped this oblivion. What is it that kept this particular story from disappearing? Despite its apparent weakness in character development and often wooden dialogue, the story has two great strengths, both of which contribute in equal measure to its long-term success. The story is an extremely successful example of the adventure genre, and the stereotypes Connell uses to create the dynamic balance from which its action springs evoke allegories which remain relevant today.

If, as Poe writes in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales,* the principal identifying attribute of the short story is that it may be read in a single sitting, a good example of the form will necessarily provide a study in economy. As a subset of the short story form, the "short adventure story" genre demands even more economy. Not only is there no space for tangents, there is no room for introspective brooding, either. The action is the story, the story the action. Success in this genre depends entirely upon sustaining a level of suspense that makes the always surprising (and yet always eagerly anticipated) outcome gratifying. Taken together, these demands for economy and action insist that a good example of the short adventure story will necessarily have tremendous internal continuity. That is, the story will push toward its final outcome at every level and everything not related to that outcome will be eliminated. With this in mind, one can begin to examine some of the structural devices Connell uses to such great formal success.

If the story is internally consistent, one should expect that even its title would have a strong connection to its outcome. The title of "The Most Dangerous Game" represents a microcosm of the entire story's action. Though this may not be entirely obvious at the outset, a closer look makes the

title's apt, formal, elegance clear. "Game" is both something played and something hunted. The most dangerous game (to play) is therefore (to hunt) man.

Read this way, the title is suggestive, but not yet robust enough to support the development of the tight, well-built story Connell crafted. Had he stopped here, Connell would have described Zaroff's island before the arrival of Rainsford. In General Zaroff's world, there exists a hierarchy of dangerous game animals, with the Cape Buffalo at the top. But Zaroff is too good a hunter for this game, and even the Cape Buffalo is overmatched. "[T]he ideal quarry," Zaroff explains, ". . .must have courage, cunning, and, above all, it must be able to reason." Once the ability to reason enters the equation, necessitating a turn to man as quarry, Zaroff discovers that all men are not equally endowed with the skills necessary to be—or play—the game. He also discovers that a hierarchy of dangerous game men exists, with Spanish sailors at the base and only "the occasional tartar" at the peak. Until the arrival of Sanger Rainsford, this is a static system: Zaroff still has not lost.

This title, however, has still more to yield. The double-entendre suggests that the story will be a parable of the divided self: if man is the most dangerous game, the most dangerous "game man" is the one most like the hunter—that is, like the self. The primary opposition between General Zaroff, a refined but amoral Cossack, and Sanger Rainsford, an equally refined but slightly more moral New Yorker, therefore, has less to do with which individual will win the game than with the dramatic possibilities of pitting a younger version of the "great white hunter" against his older self. On the other hand, Zaroff and Rainsford are simultaneously more than opposite sides of the same self, for they represent ideologies in opposition. If the premise behind the title provides the course upon which the contest between younger and older self will be run, their ideological conflict provides the impetus for both to participate in the game.

This final point may be somewhat obscure. Assume that Rainsford was persuaded by Zaroff's arguments to join in the next day's hunt. Rainsford's collaboration would have undermined the story's plot, muddying the waters enormously. In order to arrive at approximately the same outcome—Rainsford deciding "he had never slept on a better bed" after dispatching Zaroff—Connell would have had to craft an interior self of sufficient complexity to allow Rainsford to participate in the hunt,

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repent of his participation, and provide retribution. His retribution would still have had the same moral component—otherwise he would be morally indistinguishable from Zaroff—but the fact of his own participation in a manhunt would make Rainsford's moral position shaky. (This scenario is less implausible than it might at first seem. Recall that at the story's end Rainsford is completely untroubled by having hunted and killed Zaroff. However much the reader's desire to see Zaroff punished may vindicate the specific act of killing him, Rainsford has nonetheless played Zaroff's game of "outdoor chess" to the end and is, by all appearances, quite content with the outcome.)

Given the above, one can be certain of several things. First, that Rainsford's internal reversals would both take time in the telling and demand other internal context to be effective; the story would therefore be considerably longer. This change in length and focus would violate the genre restrictions I discussed earlier. The second consequence would be that Rainsford's sleep would not be untroubled. This sounds like a minor point but turns out to be rather significant, indicating out of necessity that the story has become a journey from extroverted innocence to introspective experience. Finally, had Rainsford joined the hunt, the parable of the divided self underpinning Connell's plot would no longer fit. In the adventure genre, though one may struggle with character, character is destiny. The younger self may slay the older self, but only in order to make room for the younger self in the older self's abode. Rainsford's refusal to hunt men is therefore as essential to the plot's denouement (outcome) as is his proven ability as a hunter of animals.

The final structural device to examine, then, before looking at the story's allegorical dimensions,

is the dynamic balance of similarity and difference separating and uniting Zaroff and Rainsford. The reader is provided with little contextual information about Rainsford, beyond that he is on his way to hunt jaguar in Brazil and that both Whitney and Zaroff seem to respect his prowess as a hunter. But Rainsford's skill is evidenced more strongly by Whitney's spoken admiration for Rainsford's almost superhuman marksmanship ("I've seen you pick off a moose moving in the brown fall brush at four hundred yards") and Zaroff's immediate recognition of Rainsford as the author of a treatise "about hunting snow leopards in Tibet" than by his ingenuity while pursued. Indeed, though he does manage to win at the conclusion, Rainsford's failure to outwit Zaroff in practice forces Rainsford to borrow heavily against this demonstrated experience as a hunter in the eyes of the reader. Similarly, Zaroff's conventional background as a hunter is offstage but his zeal for sport is kept beyond question. (Though the largest, most perfect trophies Rainsford has ever seen hang in the dining hall, the reader never actually enters the trophy room.)

These similarities in interest would not be sufficient to argue for any deep similarity between the men by themselves but, as Connell is at great pains to point out, the similarities do not end here. Not only are Zaroff and Rainsford consummate hunters, they are consummate aesthetes as well. Having stripped off his clothes after falling off the boat, Rainsford has no possessions with which to demonstrate his wealth, but Connell overcomes this minor obstacle by creating in Rainsford a man with no visible means of or need for support, who has no career beyond traveling the world in search of game. Beyond this, Sanger is able to recognize subtle marks of the General's enormous wealth that would escape a poorer man, from being able to identify his borrowed evening suit as "from a London tailor who ordinarily cut and sewed for none below the rank of duke," to recognizing that "the table appointments were of the finest—the linen, the crystal, the silver." The similarities do not end with matters of taste or profession, or even with how well-matched Zaroff and Rainsford are in the field; they extend even to matters of size. It is not coincidental, given that Rainsford will end the story in the deposed General's bed that the General's clothes fit Rainsford well. In the real world, the combined weight of these facts would be written off to coincidence, but there is no room in this genre for the tangential possibilities coincidence implies. One must conclude that Zaroff and Rainsford are, for the purposes of the story, different editions of the same figure.

While their similarities are compelling, it is the degree and kind of Rainsford and Zaroff's differences—differences of both culture and ideology—that drive the story's plot. Given Zaroff's criticism of Rainsford's unwillingness to hunt as "naive and. . .mid-Victorian" it is not particularly surprising that one of the ideological oppositions Connell exploits is between Victorianism and Modernism. What is somewhat surprising is that of the two, Zaroff is clearly the Victorian. The description of Zaroff's chateau makes it sound more like a castle—the sort of mid-Victorian monstrosity one would encounter in Gothic fiction, with its high, pointed towers, tall spiked gate, leering gargoyle, and baronial hall suggesting feudal times. And Zaroff's person, with his blood-red lips, Dracula-like teeth, and precise, deliberate accent mirrors his home. Zaroff cites Rainsford's "experiences in the war—" but, Rainsford cuts him off "—do not make me condone cold-blooded murder." Zaroff here represents the old Europe while "Sanger Rainsford of New York" represents the America of 1924: newly confident in the aftermath of the First World War that it is Europe's equal in might, but not immune to individual suffering. Slightly less stressed, but nonetheless present, is the conflict between American self-reliance and Europe's rigid class systems, or between serfdom and self-reliance. Zaroff's servant Ivan is the incarnation of serfdom: huge, strong, completely obedient, and dumb. By contrast, Rainsford's companion Whitney seems quite clearly to be a hunting partner, an equal.

There is one stereotype heretofore not discussed in this essay beyond an occasional allusion, a stereotype Connell invokes with sufficient originality and force to keep his story read: the "Great White Hunter." Though the story is set in the Caribbean, this fact seems arbitrary—a plausible stop between New York and somewhere in the Amazon basin. The literary setting—the setting that forms the backdrop from which both the parable of the self divided against itself emerges—is the same Victorian vision of Africa [Joseph] Conrad describes in *Heart of Darkness.* The air is "like moist black velvet"; the island so "God-forsaken" that even cannibals would not live there. (Cannibals? On the Caribbean?) Like Marlow, Conrad's protagonist, Whitney's sentences often trail off into silence, saying more by what remains unsaid: "It's rather a mystery—"; "Some superstition—"; "Even Captain Nielsen—." Evil has become "a

tangible thing—with wave lengths just as sound and light have." This is not to say Connell is derivative of Conrad—their stories are in entirely different genres—but rather, that Connell invokes a cliched—perhaps stereotypical is a better word—version of Conrad's Victorian vision of Africa. But as soon as Sanger falls overboard, this language gives way to a more robust, more journalistic prose, stylistically nearer to Hemingway than Conrad.

This is a fine point but not a minor one; it holds a key to what may be the story's saving original attribute: the juxtaposition of two historically distinct versions of the "Great White Hunter." Connell describes a contest between the Great White Hunter of his youth—he was born three years after Conrad's journey up the Congo and six years before the publication of *Heart of Darkness*—and the same figure in 1924. Throughout the story, in prose and image, these two languages mirror the conflict between the respective visions of Africa of the eras they describe. Thus, almost by coincidence, his is a contest setting two dramatically different visions of Africa against each other—the vision behind the scramble for Africa set against the era of great game hunters.

Prior to 1876, Europe's most substantial direct and indirect holdings in sub-Saharan Africa consisted of what became modern South Africa. But between 1876 and 1912, the map of Africa was redrawn. In a series of territorial and diplomatic maneuvers that came to be known as "the scramble for Africa," the territory-hungry countries of Europe (Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain) divided up among themselves the entire African continent, creating arbitrary and artificial boundaries, and leaving only Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Liberia independent of direct European control. Though the scramble was a barbaric, selfish affair, by the mid-twenties a combination of factors had made a more sentimental, less mercantile view of the era and its conquests possible (e.g., the recent horrors of the European war on one hand and increased settlement and tourism in Africa on the other.) By 1924, the dominant Victorian metaphor for Africa as a place of barbarism and darkness was giving way to the Modern vision of Africa as both a place to test one's manhood and a place of openness and beauty. What this suggests, perhaps, is that an aesthetic of the hunt is at stake, one in which hunters like Denys Finch-Hatton, whom Isak Dinesen (nee Karen Blixen) memorialized in *Out of Africa*, and Ernest Hemingway provide the prototypes for Rainsford, while Zaroff finds his closest analog in a combination of figures like Conrad's immortal Kurtz and the historical Henry M. Stanley.

Source: David Kippen, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Jim Welsh

In the following essay, Welsh compares the film version of "The Most Dangerous Game" to Connell's story, citing many of the differences between the two, particularly the changes Hollywood made to the story to take advantage of the sets and actors they had at their disposal.

Richard Connell's story "The Most Dangerous Game," offering a tightly-knit narrative of adventure and melodramatic suspense, would seem a likely vehicle for cinematic adaptation. Of the two main characters, one is ordinary, the other bizarre. The story does not involve much complexity of consciousness; rather, it succeeds as escapist entertainment, and it is therefore well-suited for the Hollywood treatment that was to be made within eight years of its writing. The story was first published in 1924; in 1932 it was produced as a motion picture for RKO by David O. Selznick and Miriam C. Cooper, directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack and Irving Pichel from a screenplay prepared by James Ashmore Creelman.

This movie has been much praised for its tight editing and effective camera-work, perhaps with some justification if one considers the hunt and chase that dominates the last thirty minutes. The screenplay makes a few situational changes and invents additional characters, also creating the need for additional dialogue. Like the story, the film begins on board ship, with the characters discussing big-game hunting and a mysterious island off in the distance. The device for getting Rainsford off the ship and on to the island is different, however, since in the story Rainsford loses his balance and falls into the sea, while in the film the yacht is misled by the false channel markers that General Zaroff later mentions in the story. The shipwreck in the movie provides additional excitement during the first ten minutes, the turmoil and confusion of the sinking yacht, the attack by sharks of the survivors, and Rainsford's escape to safety. This is a tolerable extrapolation, awkwardly extended, perhaps, but tolerable. ("Oh, it got me!" says one poor wretch as a shark consumes the submerged portion of his body.)

The changes that mark the next sequences are not so tolerable, however, when Rainsford finds his

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way to Zaroff's estate. The film was made at the same time *King Kong* was being shot, the story goes, and attempted to use many of the same actors. Of course, Fay Wray was one of the "stars" of *King Kong,* and obviously there is no role for her in Connell's story, so the filmmakers invented one. The invention makes Count Zaroff seem more sinister and more perverse than he might seem in the original story, since apparently the man's sexual appetite can only be aroused after he has satisfied his bloodlust through his murderous hunt—a bizarre aphrodisiac, to say the least. "Only after the kill does man know the true ecstasy of love," the movie character asserts.

The film deliberately elaborates the bizarre and the grotesque, partly, one supposes, in keeping with the movie trends of the times. During the early 1930s Universal Studios began two successful horror cycles— *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* —and the Gothic design of "The Most Dangerous Game" seems to imitate Universal trends. Count (not General) Zaroff is played by Leslie Banks, who affects a heavy Slavic accent that calls Count Dracula to mind, as do his evil servants, the mute Cossack Ivan and the Tartar who serves as his manservant. The Count appears to be mad: he clutches his forehead frequently, remembering the wound caused by a dangerous Cape buffalo, his eyes staring insanely as the camera zooms to a close-up, emphasized by the never subtle music of Max Steiner. In the story Connell is at pains to describe the "amenities" of civilization the General preserves at his island hideaway. All the movie can do is to show the Count carefully dressed in his evening suit, sipping champagne and playing a Max Steiner ditty on the grand piano, a piece that sounds like Tchaikovsky copulating musically with Cole Porter, to the advantage of neither.

When the movie Rainsford, played by Joel McCrea, arrives in the Count's drawing room, he is introduced to two other shipwreck victims, Eve and Martin Trowbridge. Fay Wray is therefore given a brother, a vulgar lush played stupidly for comedy by Robert Armstrong, who makes such a pest of himself that the Count understandably decides to take him hunting before the night is over. The Count says nothing to Rainsford to explain the sport he has "invented," but Eve has been on the island long enough to know that something is amiss. Two other survivors who arrived with her and her brother have since disappeared. She leads Rainsford to the Count's trophy room, where they discover the awful truth about their predicament. The Count then discovers them, and the hunt is on.

It makes dramatic (as well as box-office) sense to involve Fay Wray in the hunt. For one thing, her body becomes the stakes of the game, winner take all if Zaroff is victorious. More important, however, by having the woman with him in the jungle, Rainsford is given a logical excuse for articulating his thoughts. He is therefore able to explain for her benefit (and the audience's) what he intends by the traps he rigs. The difficulty, of course, is that a woman would tend to slow the man down, making his capture all the more easy for the Count.

The film is just over an hour long, and, in my opinion, the expository business that dominates the first half-hour is embarrassingly awkward by today's standards. No one could listen with pleasure to the drunken dialogue that has been written for Eve's brother, and even Joel McCrea as Rainsford is not too interesting a character when he speaks. Being spared bad dialogue, Noble Johnson looks right for the part of mute Ivan, scowling wonderfully. Leslie Banks is certainly well-spoken enough as the Count, but he none the less appears to be a stagey villain, as when his face is lit from below in two clumsy cutaways in the trophy room.

The action of the hunt is effectively filmed and edited, however, and suspense is built through alternating techniques, depending first on a series of crosscutting shots between pursuer and pursued, then, when the dogs are called, a series of low-angle shots of the dogs racing towards and jumping over the camera at ground level, alternating with another pull-back tracking shot of the obsessed Count running toward the camera. Finally, Rainsford and Eve are trapped, cornered. Rainsford kills one hunting dog with his knife and struggles with another until a shot from the Count's rifle drops man and dog into the sea far below, leaving Fay Wray the captive of the sexually aroused Count.

As in the story, Rainsford reappears at the Count's estate after his leap into the sea, but what is suggested by a single line in the story ("On guard, Rainsford. . .") is expanded in the film to an unforgettably bad fight sequence involving Rainsford, the Count, and two servants, followed by Rainsford's escape with Eve in a motor launch, action worthy of a serial cliff-hanger, and about as artful. The Count, mortally wounded, attempts to shoot an arrow from his Tartar bow at the escaping launch, loses his strength, and falls to his death to the dogs below. This final sequence is unbelievably campy, and yet it is perfectly typical of what might contemptuously be called the Hollywood treatment. In his "complete" guide to *TV Movies,* Leonard Maltin gives the movie a high, three-star rating, probably because of the much-admired chase sequence. The movie has been ridiculously over-rated, but, as an adaptation, I cannot think of a more revealing negative example.

Source: Jim WelshWelsh, Jim. "Hollywood Plays the Most Dangerous Game," in *Literature/Film Quarterly,* Vol. 10, no. 2, 1982, pp. 134–6.

Sources

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