

Civility within the Natural World:

An Analysis of Sanger Rainsford

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The Hero's Journey, designed by Joseph Campbell, in addition to Civilization versus Nature and Liminality, are keystone aspects in literature. These elements are shown in a variety of literary works and films, specifically *Star Wars (1997)*, *Stranger Than Fiction (2006)*, and *Psycho (1960)*. Richard Connell's short story "The Most Dangerous Game" (TMDG), ties personal defense with a romanticized sense of vengeance, by inserting a rational and civil individual onto a lone island inhabited by a hunter without regard towards human lives. The intriguing tale of morality fuses Nature with Civility, compelling one to ask where Good and Evil lie between them.

Our story begins with the main character, Sanger Rainsford, a celebrated hunter from New York City, atop a yacht on his way to another expedition. Rainsford does not follow Joseph Campbell's traditional Hero's Journey, though most aspects of Connell's story mirrors modern tellings of the Hero's Journey. TMDG begins with Rainsford's comrade Whitney expressing his fears of the *mysterious island*, a precursor, and the *call to adventure* that Rainsford was about to go on. As for his *refusal*, Rainsford did not seem to sense the same evil air that was emerging from the island; big-game hunters are not fearful of simple mysteries. This mystery, on the other hand, does get under Rainsford's skin, and just as he goes to smoke a pipe before retiring for the night, Rainsford drops his pipe and plunges overboard trying to catch it.

Rainsford's descent into the sea is where he is *crossing the threshold*, he goes from his civilized yacht and crewmen, into the sea on the blackest night he has seen. Due to the sailors aboard not hearing Rainsford's shouts, he decided to swim towards the sound of shots he heard prior to falling. Rainsford finds himself on the mysterious island, inhabited by General Zaroff, who could presumably be Rainsford's mentor, Zaroff was very pleased to board a celebrated

hunter, since he himself was a large fanatic of big game. In TMDG, *meeting of the mentor* and *trials and tribulations* are one in the same—the reader, as well as Rainsford, learns about Zaroff’s life as a hunter. The tales that Zaroff spun were a trial of both Rainsford’s patience and his morality. Zaroff’s tale of his growing boredom of big game animals, and his invention of a “new sensation” unnerved Rainsford. Zaroff’s ideal game of man versus man, one rational animal against another, and there was only one alternative to his hunt, the same for every man who sets foot on the island, either you play with Zaroff or you play with his mute giant, Ivan, who once was an official knouter of the state. This is where Sanger Rainsford digests the reality of his situation, that he is adrift from civility. Zaroff does not represent Rainsford’s mentor, but rather a possible outcome of when a hunter grows bored.

As Rainsford awakens the next day, goes downstairs, and explains to Zaroff that he wishes to leave, the absolute truth unveils. The General did want to hunt with Rainsford that day, but to his surprise, he was not hunting *with* Zaroff, Rainsford is to be hunted *by* Zaroff. That is, two esteemed hunters pitted against one another, “Outdoor chess!” Zaroff explains, (pg. 11). The *supreme ordeal* is not a traditional one on this story, rather than one climactic fight, Rainsford and the General’s hunt lasts three days. As an established hunter himself, Rainsford begins forming fox-style trails, an attempt to stifle the General’s game, but to Rainsford’s surprise, Zaroff finds him with little difficulty. And as any great sportsman, Zaroff does not kill Rainsford, he leaves him for another day. Rainsford realizes this is not a game of chess, but rather a game of predator and prey, as suggested in the story, a game of cat and mouse and he is the mouse. Rainsford starts to remind himself to keep his nerve, his *elixir* is found in the heart of fear. The second day opens with Rainsford crafting a Malay Mancatcher, which wounds the General, nevertheless he

comes back that night only to find a Burmese tiger pit, which finishes one of Zaroff's best hounds. Another amusing day for the General, and Rainsford prepares himself for the final hunting day. Awoken by rustling in the distance, Rainsford runs for the sea, where he dives as an alternative to the horrors awaiting him. There is a fine line between chess and cat and mouse; chess is two brilliant minds attempting to predict each other's next move, on the other hand, cat and mouse is one dominant, toying animal against a vulnerable, disadvantaged one.

*Resurrection* is tied with *devastation* as Rainsford emerges from the shadows outside the General's window. Another set of choices are given by the General, one of the gentlemen will serve as a repast for the hounds, and the other will sleep safely and sound. Resurrected from the sea, Rainsford is a new man; in the absence of civility, a beast grew within him. The Game began with Rainsford in a mode of self-defense, betwixt the leap into the sea and his appearance at the Colonel's chateau, a burning sense of revenge emerged, another *threshold* of his character. On the first day, Zaroff assured Rainsford that his sloop will carry him homeland after the hunt as long as he speaks nothing of what happened, however Rainsford promises he will tell. Knowing this, Rainsford came prepared with his blood boiling and "had never slept in a better bed," (pg 15.)

Richard Connell's last line in "The Most Dangerous Game" could convey a few connotations, whether or not Rainsford felt sorrow for what he had done was not directly noted but the bed he slept in was very satisfying either way. A possible implication of this line, is that Rainsford enjoyed what he had done; while civility in society is what makes it function, man was born to be undomesticated, and thusly when a men acts as the wild creature he is, it will feel natural and gratifying. Another possibility of Rainsford's slumber is he is delighted with himself

for performing a considerable task of defending his own life, and he did it honestly. In TMDG, it is seen that Rainsford and the Colonel are personifications of Civilization and Nature, in that they noticeably argued for one aspect over the other. While Colonel Zaroff suggests men ought to feed their instinctual need for *the hunt*, Rainsford attempts to explain as to why what Zaroff carries out is merely murder and unethical. To place a civil character in a situation in which they find themselves in the heart of nature, is a common practise for writers, such as Richard Connell in his short story TMDG—as a fictitious social experiment—the civil character is seen to consistently give in to Nature as an ideal segway into manhood, or visa versa. Rainsford does this in his resurrection from the sea, a realization that logic will not serve him in getting home.

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The trilogy *Star Wars* was written and directed by George Lucas in 1977, the film follows a young man, Luke Skywalker, from a solemn planet to an otherworldly adventure and the classic tale of Good facing Evil. In looking at TMDG's Sanger Rainsford alongside Luke Skywalker, one can compare the father-figure in both stories as flawed individuals, distorted models not to be looked to up. The father-figure in TMDG for Rainsford would be Colonel Zaroff, a young man meeting an older gentleman, both of which are huntsmen—this gives Rainsford a peak into a possible future in the life of being a hunter, becoming the ultimate predator. While a conversation does not take place between Luke Skywalker and his father, Darth Vader, exactly as it does between Rainsford and the Colonel, Luke and Darth Vader do have a pinnacle moment in which Darth Vader tempts Luke to come to the “dark side” with more

*power*. The exchange between Rainsford and Zaroff deals in Civilization, acting as Good, and Nature, as Evil, though Skywalker is Natural-Good and Darth Vader is Civil-Evil, and thusly fight in just the same fashion.

The exemplar trope of Good versus Evil can be intermittently swapped with the contents of Nature and Civilization; it is also common to see in literature that Good overcomes Evil, although this can be seen as the hero protagonist submitting to certain aspects of the opposing characteristic. As seen in both TMDG and *Star Wars*, Rainsford gives into his natural side and is then able to win “the game”, and Skywalker gives into Nature by accepting the help of two smuggling miscreants, Han Solo and Chewbacca, without which Luke would have failed. As shown, the way to victory is to step a foot into the waters of the opposing element, be it Nature or Civility, Good and Evil will reside in the two alike.

The film *Stranger Than Fiction*, screenplay written by Zach Helm and directed by Marc Forster in 2006, concerns a middle-aged gentleman, called Harold Crick, who suddenly is aware of his fate by the means of a voice in his head. From the moment the voice begins to speak in Harold’s head, he enters a place of liminality. A liminal state can be described as where the character is in one place alongside another at the same time, or a nowhere point in between, be it spatially, temporally, or spiritually, and once the character exits this state they would then be more open-minded as a fully rounded hero.

Harold Crick’s liminal place was with the voice of an eloquent, renowned author, Karen Eiffel, of true-to-life horror fiction in his head; preceding this, Crick is an obsessive-compulsive IRS agent who lives his life “counting brush strokes”, until one day it stated. Crick, with the assistance of English literature professor Jules Hilbert, attempts to understand what his situation

could be. It was not until Eiffel said, “little did he know,” did Hilbert assess Crick’s position, “little did he know” implies the voice knows something that Crick does not. The liminal progression of Harold Crick, both living life autonomously free, and the life narrated by Eiffel and her carve-into-stone typewriter. Eiffel knew the fate of Crick, just as Zaroff thought he knew Rainsford’s, and both Crick and Rainsford aimed to evade their fate as hard as any mortal man can. In a liminal place, such as where one questions if they can or cannot change their destined fate, the inner-self *elixir* of “nerve” is the only recourse. Harold Crick’s “nerve” is shown through concerning himself less about work and numbers, and more about attending to his natural human needs, such as attachments in friendship and love; this is another example of Civilization meeting Nature and rounding out a hero. Similar to director Hitchcock’s *MacGuffins*, a device or goal to pursue and drive the plot, if Crick or Rainsford had not found their “nerve” then they both would have sunk into their fate of death and never left their liminal place.

Another “fictitious social experiment”, of a Civil character entirely lost from society, can be seen in the cult classic *Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1960, based on a novel written by Robert Bloch. In the story of *Psycho*, a woman called Marion Crane comes into the possession of a large sum of cash, which if translated to a modern amount would be just over a quarter of a million dollars. Deciding to revel in the funds herself, Crane leaves the city and takes the highway seldom taken. While Crane does not plunge into a sea of certain doom just as Rainsford does in TMDG, there is as little probability of escape on Zaroff’s mystery island as there is in the motel that Crane finds herself checking in to. The two narratives indirectly mirror each other—Crane is the Rainsford and, the owner of the hotel, Norman Bates is the Colonel

Zaroff. Bates welcomes Crane with open vacancies and nourishment, in similar fashion to Zaroff's hospitality, during which repast both Zaroff and Bates talk of unnerving subjects. Bates talks of the mistreatments of his mother, her necroses, and her hatred for outside civilization.

Similarly to that of TMDG's Rainsford and *Star Wars*'s Luke Skywalker, Marion Crane is a civil character who enjoys the trappings of societal life, and in her leaving of the city, she finds herself giving into Nature. Hitchcock adapts this surrender to Nature by shifting the point of focus from Crane to Norman Bates, by killing Crane with an indistinguishable villain. In doing so, Bates is then portrayed as the innocent protagonist—through analyzing the film *Psycho*, one can see Hitchcock's attempt to make Crane and Bates a balanced projection of Nature and Civilization as if one was as equally inferior as the other. Hitchcock then established the first psychological horror film, by emphasizing that Evil can live within either Nature or Civilization, this lead one to conclude that if the Hero does not find their inner-self Elixir, they will perish just as Marion Crane did.

In considering Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey and the other ingredients of common literature works, from classic to modern, the journey that Sanger Rainsford leads is notably comparable to that of Crane/Bates'. Due to the feral animal steadily growing inside of Rainsford, his transition into his natural side, he reflects that of Bates' denial of his mother's death, which lead to Bates' eventual cataclysm. During the time that Rainsford spent on the island, he denied that Nature could be better than Civilization, believing that civility was just as alive on that island as Bates' mother was in his basement. The denial resided in both Rainsford and Bates through to the end—Rainsford's version of self-defense, which resembled the very act he had rebuked Zaroff over, murder, was parallel to Bates' belief that his mother was alive and

responsible for the death of Marion Crane. In conclusion, if one steps out of their “Ordinary World”, be it Civility or Nature, no matter how hard, they will not be able to not surrender to the conditions of the other and Good and Evil can remain in either.