

“The Hunter Hunted”: Deconstructing Anthropocentrism in Richard Connell’s *The Most Dangerous Game*

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Abstract

The extinction of many animal species and the threat of further extinction of even more is one of the main hazards that the natural environment is facing today. From the massive destruction of the natural habitats of these animals to large scale poaching, man’s harmful activities continue to seriously place nature in jeopardy. As these problems become more urgent there are different calls for man to rethink and change his attitude towards the environment. Richard Connell in his short story *The Most Dangerous Game* employs a most efficient method towards conscientizing humans. By making humans to experience the pains of being preyed upon, he causes humans to feel exactly what animals feel thus provoking a change in their outlook and attitude towards animals. Read against a backdrop of postcolonialism and Ecocriticism, this paper holds that by changing roles and making man the hunted, Connell raises ecological consciousness and successfully draws man’s attention to the fate of the animals that they hunt and kill for their satisfaction and pleasure.

[**Keywords:** Marginality, Ecocriticism, Zoocriticism, animal rights, Postcolonial theory, anthropocentrism, speciesism]

Introduction

Human relationships have throughout the centuries have been characterized principally by domination of one group by another based on aspects such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion and gender. This has often resulted in dichotomous and tensed relationships which sometimes lead to violence. The conquest of various regions of the world by others in what is generally referred to as colonization is one of the most glaring instances of this domination. This domination of one group by another has extended to other species whereby humankind has completely subjugated animals to a most sorry situation. Humans have in their domineering attitudes reduced animals to the position where they exist to satisfy humankind’s various desires. Thus animals now constitute the “new” colonies of humans. This explains why some critics have underlined a commonality between Ecocriticism which takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies and postcolonial studies which interrogates the European conquest and domination of other peoples and lands. Pablo Mukherjee has intimated thus:

Surely, any field purporting to theorize the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism (let us call it postcolonial studies) cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict,

literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretative importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material coordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species. (Qtd in Huggan and Tiffin;2)

This justifies the adoption of both ecocriticism and postcolonial theory in analyzing the subject of anthropocentrism in Richard Connell's *The Most Dangerous Game*. The story shows that ways in which humans reduce animals to mere objects for their pleasure.

While the last century was one whose major problem according to W.E.B. Dubois was that of the colour bar, it is clear to everyone that the problem of this present century is one of an environmental/ecological order. All over the globe today the ruin of the natural environment and the consequences thereof are glaring: the loss of the tropical rainforests with the loss of habitats of many animal species, the rising sea level, acid rains, global warming amongst a plethora of others constitute just a tip of the iceberg of the ecological crises which humankind's harmful activities continue to create and/or exacerbate. Among these problems the natural world faces today, the extinction of many animal species continue to occupy an important place. Humankind's activities have deprived many animals of their natural habitats and their source of feeding exposing them to destruction. But beyond this there is the direct destruction of some of these animal species through poaching and excessive hunting of even protected species in different regions of the world. Some of these animals are killed for their fur, others for leather some for other ornamental objects for humankind's luxuries. While in certain regions, hunting for pleasure still constitutes a source of leisure for many individuals and is carried out on a large scale. All of these jeopardize the non-human animal species which are daily destroyed for the pleasure and luxuries of humans. Besides these, human's destruction of some of these animal species most often involve putting them through pain which humans totally disregard. Thus animals are subjected to cruel treatment by the humans. This has been preceded by the subjection of animals to an inferior status not unlike what reserved for many of the colonized people the world over. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin have underscored this when they hold that:

Animal categorizations and the use of animal metaphors have been and are characteristic of human languages is often in association with racism and speciesism: 'you stupid cow'; politicians with their 'snouts in the trough'; 'male chauvinist pig'. The history of human oppression of other humans is replete with instances of animal metaphors and animal categorizations frequently deployed to justify exploitation and objectification, slaughter and enslavement. (135)

There have been many calls for humans to change their attitude towards the other elements of nature. This is important because the ecological crisis the world is facing today is indiscriminate affecting both the human and non-human elements of nature. Within the humanities, ecocriticism has been established as the response of the literati to these problems for as Cheryl Glotfelty (1996) has insinuated: "as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem" (xxi). Similarly, postcolonial theory has proved itself

to be one of the theories best suited to approach questions of subjugation and discrimination; thus Huggan and Tiffin have underlined that “postcolonialism’s major theoretical concerns: otherness, racism and miscegenation, language, translation, the trope of cannibalism, voice and the problems of speaking of an for others- to name just a few – offer immediate entry points for a re-theorizing of the place of animals in relation to human societies” (135). This paper therefore attempts an ecocritical and postcolonial reading of Richard Connell’s short story *The Most Dangerous Game* to show how the author in this story successfully builds the case against the destruction of the other animal species of the ecosystem by humans. He stands against cruelty to animals and their wanton destruction by humans through a technique of role reversal whereby humans experience the dynamics of being hunted and preyed upon.

Constructing Anthropocentrism and Cruelty to Animals

However, before delving into Connell’s construction of this case it is imperative to give a definition of the term ecocriticism. According to Cheryll Glofelty “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (xviii). This earth-centered approach also includes the other animal species of the earth and this is why in this text, I adopt an ecocritical analysis because Connell’s interest in and engagement of the non-human draws a relationship between literature and the physical environment since animals constitute part of this physical environment. For its part, postcolonial theory is interested in interrogating the colonial enterprise and its “material practices and effects, such as transportation, slavery, displacement, emigration, and racial and cultural discrimination” (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, 7). Ashcroft et al however add in a later text that postcolonial theory has extended to address issues pertaining to the environment. They state thus:

One of the most persistent and controversial topics of contemporary politics is the issue of the environment. Global warming has demonstrated the devastating effects of the industrial revolution and the unfettered pursuit of capital expansion. The environment and attendant topics such as ecofeminism, ecological imperialism, environmentalism, speciesism have all taken an increasingly prominent place in post-colonial thought because it has become clear that there is a direct connection between colonialist treatment of indigenous flora and fauna and the treatment of colonized and otherwise dominated societies. (viii)

This concern with the environment explains the use of postcolonial theory in this analysis.

The Most Dangerous Game opens with a conversation between two game hunters Whitney and Rainsford about the art of hunting. This conversation marks the beginning of the construction of anthropocentrism and cruelty towards animals. In the course of their conversation, Whitney expresses the hope that the jaguar guns have come from Purdey’s. This establishes the fact that the story concerns hunting of animals by humans

as Whitney adds that: “we should have some good hunting up the Amazon. Great sport hunting” (8), to which Rainsford the great game hunter replies “the best sport in the world” (8). These statements from these hunters show how much humans have placed themselves at the center of the universe to the point of considering the destruction of other species a sport, a source of pleasure and leisure. Humans have no consideration for other species considering them as not only inferior, but worse of all dispensable. Huggan and Tiffin observe that “within many cultures [...] anthropocentrism has long been naturalized. The absolute prioritization of one’s own species’ interest over those of the silenced majority is still regarded as being ‘only natural’ (5). The conversation continues thus:

“For the hunter” amended Whitney, “Not for the Jaguar”

“Don’t talk rot, Whitney” said Rainsford. “You’re a big-game hunter, not a philosopher. “Who cares how a jaguar feels?”

“Perhaps the jaguar does”. Observed Whitney

“Bah! They’ve no understanding.”

“Even so I think they understand one thing- fear. The fear of pain and the fear of death” (8).

This conversation is illuminating as it portrays through Rainsford humanity’s indifference and disregard for other animal species, especially their pain and suffering. Whitney, although a game-hunter himself is apparently developing some sympathy for the jaguar that they hunt and kill but not Rainsford who cynically asks who cares what a jaguar feels. Through this conversation Connell constructs anthropocentrism, whereby humans consider themselves not as part of the ecosystem, but rather as being above the ecosystem where they have the right to wrongfully use other co-owners of their natural space for their sport. So to Rainsford, the feelings of the animals are inconsequential and all that matters is the great pleasure that he derives from hunting them. Thus he concludes the argument with Whitney with the anthropocentric observation that “the world is made up of two classes – the hunters and the huntees [sic] Luckily you and I are the hunters” (8). This statement aptly captures and summarizes the belief of humans that they are superior to every other animal specie and therefore can do with them as they deem fit. Huggan and Tiffin cite Plumwood who argues that

The western definition of humanity depended and still depends on the presence of the ‘non-human’: the uncivilized, the animal and the animalistic. European justification for invasion and colonialism proceeded from this basis, understanding non-European lands and the people and animals that inhabited them as ‘spaces’, ‘unused’, underused or empty. The very idea of colonization is thus one where anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism are inseparable. (5)

The European attitude towards non-Europeans can be seen at work here in the attitude of humans towards non-humans. It is a form of colonization based this time around on specie.

Humans therefore disregard any pains that animals experience in the process of being hunted and simply take pleasure in their position as lords of the universe. Humans

do not consider themselves as part of the natural ecosystem where there is need for sharing and mutual respect as a prelude to peaceful co-existence, rather they see themselves as the masters of the universe, the only specie entitled to feelings and worthy of consideration even when they neither consider the feelings of the other species. This stands in stark opposition to Barry Commoner’s first law of Ecology that “everything is connected to everything else” (qtd in Glotfelty: xix).

Shortly after this exchange, Rainsford accidentally falls off the yacht into the sea from where he painstakingly swims to the shore. As he is swimming to shore he hears gunshots and decides to follow that direction because these gunshots can only mean human presence. This is confirmed when he hears a “high screaming sound, the sound of an animal in an extremity of anguish and terror” (10). Once again we are confronted with human cruelty towards animals and Rainsford observes that “where there are pistol shots, there are men” (10). The full evidence of this and the consequence thereof are seen when shortly thereafter, Rainsford comes across signs of a killed animal:

Some wounded thing, by the evidence a large animal, had thrashed about in the underbrush; the jungle weeds were crushed down and the moss lacerated; one patch of weed was stained crimson. A small, glittering object not far away caught Rainsford’s eye and he picked it up, it was an empty cartridge.

“A twenty-two”, he remarked. “That’s odd. It must have been a fairly large animal too. The hunter had his nerve to tackle it with a light gun. It’s clear that the brute put up a fight. I suppose the first three shots I heard was when the hunter flushed his quarry and wounded it. The last shot was when he trailed it here and finished it. (10/11)

This is an extremely illuminating passage as to the cruel treatment humans mete to non-human animals. Here is a case where for the pleasure of the hunter, he shoots and wounds an animal, then lets it wonder in pain and agony before chasing and finally killing it. This hunter selects a light gun which will not instantly kill the animal but helps to prolong its suffering. The imagery that Connell employs in the above description goes a long way to show how the harmful activities of humans negatively affect the natural environment. He says the “jungle weeds were crushed down”, the “moss lacerated” and the weed “stained crimson”. All of these symbolize the destruction of the natural environment by humans. Thus from the very beginning of the story, Connell establishes man’s destructive tendency towards other species, whereby he places himself above all else, not as a protector but as an abuser. Rainsford does not care how animals that are chased, wounded, and destroyed feel.

Later, when Rainsford finds himself at the chateau of General Zaroff, he is greeted as follows: “it is a very great pleasure and honor to welcome Mr. Sanger Rainsford, the celebrated hunter, to my home” (12). So Rainsford has already established his reputation as a celebrated game hunter to the point of writing a book on hunting as General Zaroff continues: “I’ve read your book about hunting snow leopards in Tibet, you see” (12). Here

it is seen how a reputation as hunter-cum-destroyer of other species is considered commendable and such an individual is treated with respect.

Further proof of man's destruction of animals is presented in the house of General Zaroff whose dining room is decorated with the heads of numerous animals he has killed: "about the hall were the mounted heads of many animals – lions, tigers, elephants, moose, bears; larger or more perfect specimens Rainsford had never seen" (12). Rainsford admires all of these heads and even remarks to the General that "You have some wonderful heads here", said Rainsford as he ate a particularly well cooked filet mignon. "That cape buffalo is the largest I ever saw" (13). Both Rainsford and General Zaroff are big game hunters whose greatest sport is hunting.

General Zaroff like Rainsford is an experienced hunter who has been involved in hunting for the greater part of his life, having been introduced into hunting by his father at the incredible age of five. He recounts that:

When I was only five years old he gave me a little gun, specially made in Moscow for me to shoot sparrows with. When I shot some of his prize turkeys with it, he did not punish me; he complemented me on my marksmanship. I killed my first bear in the Caucasus when I was ten...my whole life has been one prolonged hunt...I have hunted every kind of game in every land. It would be impossible for me to tell you how many animals I have killed. (14)

He continues recounting that after he left Russia he continued hunting: "naturally, I continued to hunt – grizzlies in your Rockies, Crocodiles in the Ganges, rhinoceroses in East Africa. It was in Africa that the Cape buffalo hit me and laid me up for six months. As soon as I recovered I started for the Amazon to hunt jaguars..." (14). So General Zaroff like Rainsford has made hunting a life sport and it is seen how he boasts of the countless number of animals he has killed for his pleasure. Once again this points to human cruelty to other species born of his/her feeling of superiority over other species. To him, these animals he has killed throughout his life constitute trophies. He does not care that he has killed more animals than he can recollect, all that matters is his great incomparable skill in hunting of which he is so boastful. From such a perspective, animals are barely there to serve the needs of humans. Their feelings and their right to an existence are denied them by humans who have arrogated to themselves the position of master of the universe. This is what Huggan and Tiffin citing Plumwood call 'hegemonic centrism' which "accounts not only for environmental *racism*, but also for institutionalized *speciesism* that continue to be and to rationalize the exploitation of animal (and animalized human) 'others' in the name of a human- and reason- centred culture that is at least a couple of millennia old (5).

This conversation between General Zaroff and Rainsford sets the next stage of this paper which involves role-changing wherein Rainsford the big game hunter now becomes the hunted and experiences first hand the raw fear that being hunted and preyed upon elicits. By showing what animals go through, Connell discourages their senseless destruction.

Reversal of Roles and the Case against Animal Destruction

In the course of their conversation, Rainsford says he has always considered the Cape Buffalo as the most dangerous game. The general however tells him that he is wrong because he has more dangerous game on his island and when Rainsford asks if this could be tigers, the General responds that “hunting tigers ceased to interest me some years ago. I exhausted their possibilities, you see, no thrill left in tigers, no real danger. I live for danger, Mr. Rainsford” (13).

With this statement, General Zaroff, tells Rainsford that he now hunts other humans because he can match his reason against theirs whereas non-human animals have only instinct which is no match for him. He therefore tells Rainsford that he will have to become his next prey, or be brutally killed by his bodyguard if he refuses. Faced with no better choice Rainsford agrees and the General asks him to have a three days lead ahead of him and he will chase him thereafter. Rainsford thus sets out fleeing for his life. The author says of him thus “Rainsford had fought his way through the bush for two hours. “I must keep my nerve. I must keep my nerve” (19). Here he becomes the prey, the hunted. The tables have turned and thus begins his experience of what the animals he hunts experience, the animals whom he declares he does not care how they feel. The author continues that “His whole idea was to put distance between himself and General Zaroff, and to this end, he had plunged along, spurred by the sharp rowels of something very like panic” (19). He starts experiencing the panic and fear and interestingly in this new position as hunted, he draws from other preys of his as he “executed a series of intricate loops,...recalling the lore of the fox hunt, and all the dodges of the fox” (19). At a point he thinks “I have played the fox, now I must play the cat of the fable” (19), here he climbs a tree to rest.

Soon thereafter, Rainsford is terrified that the General has successfully decoded his intricate trail to the point of searching through the trees for him. When after searching, the General smiles and leaves, Rainsford experiences terror: first of all because he realizes that General Zaroff could follow a trail through the night and a very difficult trail at that. But worse of all he harbors another thought which “sent a shudder of cold terror through his whole being” (20), and this is because he suddenly realizes that General Zaroff’s smile as he looked up the tree in which he was hiding, can only mean that had found him out but was merely prolonging the hunt so as to have greater pleasure by walking away and not killing him. At this point in time, Rainsford comes to the full realization that he had indeed become the prey when he understands that “the Cossack was the cat; he was the mouse” (20). This is the most ironical scene of the story because hitherto Rainsford had bragged to Whitney that he was the hunter and not the huntee [sic].

Furthermore, when Rainsford sets a trap that unfortunately for him does not kill the General but only slightly injures him, Rainsford once again experiences raw fear “Rainsford with fear gripping his heart, heard the General’s mocking laugh ring through the jungle” (22). Before now Rainsford had mockingly dismissed the fear of hunted

animals but now he experiences it first hand causing him once again to take flight like the hunted animal he has become “it was flight now, a desperate, hopeless flight that carried him on for some time” (21).

Connell continues to develop Rainsford’s experience of fear when he succeeds in killing one of General Zaroff’s dogs and the General brings his whole pack of hounds to hunt Rainsford. It is said that when he awakens to the sound of the baying of a pack of hounds, this “made him know new things about fear” (22).

When the hounds pick up his scent and start chasing him, it is said of him that “he ran for his life” but beyond this, what is most important is that at this point “Rainsford knew now how an animal at bay feels” (23). Within the framework of this paper, I consider this to be the climax of the story, where Rainsford comes to realize that hunted animals experience true and painful fear. He goes back on what he had said before to Whitney at the beginning of the story and acknowledges that animals too have feelings worthy of consideration.

At the end of the day, faced with the pack of hounds and the sea, Rainsford chooses what to him is the lesser evil. He jumps into the sea. He however swims back to General Zaroff’s chateau, and kills him.

Conclusion

Through a highly successful reversal of roles, Connell develops a strong case against human’s wanton destruction of other life forms, through hunting, and destruction of game for human pleasure and satisfaction. Whereas at the beginning of the story, Rainsford is an accomplished hunter who despises and disregards the feelings of the animals, by the end of the story, having lived through what a hunted animal feels, he doubtlessly has a change of heart.

It is important that in his dangerous game with the general he does not die, otherwise the purpose of consciousness- raising as far as animals are concerned will fall to pieces. As a survivor, he stands a better chance of advocating for animal rights and to stand against human cruelty to them. Furthermore, the reader by sharing in Rainsford’s fear and terror develops consideration for animals as well.

Connell has thus given voice to the voiceless or devoiced animals to express themselves to humans showing them what pains they experience when they are hunted. He does this by making a human to ‘wear the shoes’ of the animals so as to know exactly where it pinches. Reading through this story can therefore cause humans to rethink their actions against non-human animals. Thus ecocriticism which draws the relationship between literature and the physical environment has proved vital in the analysis of this text, highlighting the ways in which literature can serve more purposes than mere entertainment. Also, postcolonialism has permitted me to conceptualize the relationship of power and powerlessness that characterizes human/non-human relationship. The American Ecocritic Lawrence Buell has iterated that “criticism worthy of its name arises

from commitment deeper than professionalism”(9). It is in this regard that Ecocriticism and postcolonialism, two theories that are committed to social change have guided this analysis.

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