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Being Sisyphus: The Mythological Basis of Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game”

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport... King Lear

Neither his fellows, nor his gods,
nor his passions will leave a man alone.

Joseph Conrad, Notes on Life and Letters

Upon the quintessential adventure story “The Most Dangerous Game,” first published in *Collier’s Magazine* on January 19, 1924, and winner that year of the O. Henry Memorial Prize, rests the claim to fame of Richard Connell (1893-1949). An enduringly popular tale, often anthologized and included in college readers, the core plot has had numerous retellings, frequently involving liberties, in a variety of media—TV and radio shows, movies and comic books.¹ A simple story outline is as follows: Some time in the early 1920s a big-game hunter from New York, steaming to South America on a yacht, in the night falls overboard into the Caribbean Sea. He swims to an uncharted island and, still dripping, knocks on the door of a mansion. The owner, a Russian aristocrat and fellow huntsman, welcomes him with clothing, food, and rest. Later he invites his guest to join in his hunts for sailors lured to the island. When the American in disgust refuses, the host, pistol armed, insists he then must become the game, provided only with a headstart, a small knife, and his wits. After some close shaves, the guest escapes to the sea, but returns to beard the host in his bedroom and to slay him, ending the drama.

The original situation of a depraved manhunt on an uncharted Caribbean island at first seems a conventional clash of dichotomous archetypes, thesis versus antithesis. In the view of one critic, protagonist against antagonist pits “a rugged American individualist” against a decadent representative of an “Old World order” (Thompson, “Of Two Classes”’ 66; Thompson, “Connell’s” 88); the former prevails, and social history is illuminated, at least etiologically.² Such a reading is a response to the intentional duplicity of the surface text, a surface that functions as a tropic enhancement of a rich psychological dilemma born of a complex social concern at the story’s heart. Getting beneath the surface entails an analysis of the story’s performative social criticism that draws its aesthetic energy from the presence of classical myths, operating
structurally in a narrative. Classical mythologic allusion in stories is in itself unremarkable, but the large number found here, direct and oblique, promotes the rationale for an allegorical reading.

The foremost myth is that of Sisyphus. Like all myths this one involves variations, but the most stable features are these: Sisyphus, a king of Corinth, angers the gods, especially Zeus, by his hubristic behavior. Though a promoter of navigation and commerce he was nonetheless fraudulent and avaricious, and known even to slay travelers. For punishment he is remanded to the Underworld, specifically Tartarus, a place deeper than Hades, an abyss mired in despair and murky gloom—a “hell” in which Heroes commingle with lesser spirits. There Sisyphus is compelled to push a boulder up a steep hill, only to have it tumble from the top to the bottom, from where he must begin pushing it up again, in an eternal repetition.

In the present story a surface tension derives from the atmosphere of shock and menace evoked by the narrative of the hunt, from Zaroff’s malevolent cunning and Rainsford’s panicky evasion. The two principals appear to represent irreconcilables of good and evil, inviting a reader to side with good’s champion, the “straight-talking, All-American hero in [the person of] the square-jawed, clean-shaven Sanger Rainsford” locked in battle with an imperialistic Eurasian (Thompson, “Of Two Classes” 73). Yet regarding the text as wholly allegorical reveals the struggle of but a single individual within himself, striving to overcome the influences of a dehumanizing socio-economic milieu into which he has been born, urged to seek catharsis by the “gods” of conscience. If successful his reward will be a sense of self-worth and dignity. The struggle is symbolized mythologically, the story’s two main characters representing Sisyphus at two distinct stages of his career: first chronicling his initiation to the punishment process and then showing him already jaded by its toils.

Before considering the two as one, it may be useful to reconcile the surface features. Son of a nobleman of vast land holdings in the Crimea—“a quarter of a million acres” (Connell, “Game” 14)—General Zaroff lives a life of privilege revolving around the sport of world-class hunting, supported, initially, by economic feudalism. Though he identifies himself with other “noble Russians” (Connell, “Game” 14)—a phrase that allows two readings, one arbitrary—the patriarchal system he represents had become, by 1924, intolerably inequitable, the peasant class having been officially abolished. He retains, however, great enough wealth to acquire a
Caribbean island upon which to build a stone chateau, whose interior “suggested a baronial hall of feudal times . . . (Connell, “Game” 12), and to support a lifestyle of opulence. The bulk of his money had been, and may still be, “‘invested heavily in American securities’” (Connell, “Game” 14). Despite basic differences feudalistic and capitalistic systems share many features, chief of which is a huge laboring class as an underpinning, a societal segment that is inherently and necessarily an object of exploitation or predation by the class it supports. As early man hunted for food and clothing and modern man does so for sport, an analogy arises in the wake of industrialization wherein the upper classes begin to regard the efforts by the mass of laborers as representing an inevitable sacrifice to their hereditary privilege, just as predation had shifted from stark necessity to leisure-time diversion. In pre-depression America the laboring class was not significantly represented in the stock market, a fact encouraging the investor class to grow in hubris. Zaroff exists in his own moral superiority: though not exactly a king, he is a one-off Czar, a general formerly in control of a large peasantry, whose forced exertions on his behalf are taken for granted. Ultimately he will hunt victims from such a class, referring to them as “‘the scum of the earth’” (Connell, “Game” 16).

Sanger Rainsford may not be a blueblood, but his blood certainly runs gold. He is not, as has been asserted, “a member of the laboring class” who “writes books for a living” (Thompson, “‘Of Two Classes’” 72), and is anything but “optimistic and egalitarian” (Thompson, “Connell’s” 87). His book on hunting Tibetan snow leopards, well known to Zaroff, can only be pure dilettantism, his primary avocation being that of “‘celebrated hunter’” (Connell, “Game” 12). At this period anyone in possession of an ocean-going private yacht (New York to South America), mentioned twice in succession by way of a credential upon entering the chateau, who has leisure time for big-game hunts spanning continents, and who is a member of “‘the educated class’” (Connell, “Game” 15)—i.e., exclusive, college bred—clearly is not dependent for funds on niche non-fiction royalties. He too has had military experience; yet only five or six years removed from First World War battlefield action, a still youthful Rainsford has clearly come by his considerable wealth through inheritance, like Zaroff. His name, even, connotes privilege derived from an exploited population: *Reigns Ford* (or *Ford Reigns* or *The Reign of Ford*) celebrates that epochal zenith of de-humanizing (i.e., less than human, animal) mass production, ironically commemorated by Aldous Huxley in his *Brave New World*. Henry Ford, himself an industrious, hard worker, nonetheless engendered a line of related persons who received great material
enhancements simply by the connection. Like Rainsford, the Fords often headed for the land of the Amazons, Rio de Janeiro, one of their family vacation spots for many years.³

While Rainsford has heretofore uncritically acquiesced to the socio-economic hegemony that supports his affluent lifestyle, he is presently beginning to recognize the vacuity of selfish materialism and its human cost, and is thus ready to begin a process of purgation instigated by the Zeus of conscience.⁴ Steaming south to Rio—symbolically downward (passing through, in the words of a shipmate, a “God-forsaken place,” a “zone” of “evil” [Connell, “Game” 9])—in pursuit of the ever more dangerous and challenging prey offered by jaguars, he snaps at his companion and superego Whitney for philosophical speculations toward the fears felt by the stalked cats. Admonishing Whitney to “be a realist,” Rainsford in his conflationary rejoinder shifts the focus from animals to the entire “world,” as disdain for those not of his class finds sudden expression in a contracted societal vision of there being only “two classes—the hunters and the huntees. Luckily, you [Whitney] and I are the hunters” (Connell, “Game” 8), thus placing himself squarely and functionally in a position already acceded to by Zaroff, of using humans for “game.”

Though his first name connotes sanguinity, as has been noted (Thompson, “Connell’s” 86), it also holds anger within itself. His snarls at the huntees of the world only mask a growing guilt and self-loathing. Such dawning awareness signals his readiness for purgation. A master of hunting nearing the peak of his game Rainsford finds his bloodlust for the sport succumbing to an incipient ennui, deadening to his senses: possessed of normally acute vision (“. . . I’ve seen you [Rainsford] pick off a moose moving in the brown fall bush at four hundred yards, but even you can’t see four miles or so through a moonless Caribbean night” [Connell, “Game” 8]), he indeed is now unable to see “through the dank tropical night that was palpable as it pressed its thick warm blackness in upon the yacht” (Connell, “Game” 8). The boat has morphed into a ferry, its Captain Nielsen into a Charon (right down to the traditional blue eyes) conveying him into the Stygian Underworld symbolized by Zaroff’s island, an apt topography as hubris isolates its “victim.” Using unintended verbal irony that strikes to the heart of the sin of Sisyphus the chthonic boatman’s challenge to the yachtmen/hunters implicitly censures them for their cold disdain: ““Don’t you feel anything? . . .”” (Connell, “Game” 9).
The place they approach known as “‘Ship-Trap Island’” is regarded by superstitious mariners with “‘dread’” and has an *Odyssey* atmosphere of mythic overtones, being found only on “‘old charts’” (Connell, “Game” 8). Alone on the deck, “indolently” smoking his pipe, Rainsford unrepentant resembles a lotus-eater, lulled by “[t]he sensuous drowsiness of the night,” till a gunshot in the dark brings him to the rail; dropping his pipe and grasping for it, he falls overboard: “he realized he had reached too far and had lost his balance” (Connell, “Game” 9), a remark that applies equally to his current mental state. Rainsford’s toils in the sea at the island’s verge, dully repetitive as he counts his strokes, anticipate the fuller range of numbing “punishment” to follow, as does the adamantine ambience immediately succeeding: “Jagged crags appeared to jut up into the opaqueness; he forced himself upward, hand over hand. Gasping, his hands raw, he reached a flat place at the top.” A few paragraphs later, footprints—those of Zaroff’s “hunting boots,” in whose shoes he now literally walks even as symbolically he will later—lead him to a “cliff” surmounted by “one enormous building—a lofty structure with pointed towers plunging upward into the gloom” (Connell, “Game” 10-11)—Zaroff’s stone chateau, but also the characteristic temple found in the Underworld, guarded likewise by ever-watchful Cerberus dogs who freely allow the shades ingress but never egress.

Out of the stoniness and gloom Zaroff appears, descending “marble steps” (Connell, “Game” 12). Identical in build to Rainsford, he furnishes him with his own clothes. Indeed, he declares himself already well acquainted with the other, through having read Rainsford’s book on hunting. Reinforcing the doppelganger symbolism is the fact that Sisyphean punishment is cyclical. Zaroff’s being “past middle age (Connell, “Game” 12) compared with Rainsford’s being, in the General’s words, “‘a young man’” (Connell, “Game” 15), reveals the same individual at different points of a purgatorial spectrum. Zaroff affirms his association with the Underworld by further identifying himself as a Cossack, a member of the Turkic branch of Tartars, so named according to the *OED* for their association with Tartarus, hell. Bloodied but not yet bowed, the General, employing significant terms, is forced to acknowledge his ultimate reversal: “‘Occasionally I strike a tartar’” (Connell, “Game” 17)—a reference not merely to a recalcitrant or resourceful adversary, but to the intractable opposition of the gods to his hubris, expressed in and as a cycle of torture. Akin to the exertions of pushing a boulder up a mountain, the dangers inherent in his *game*, in both senses of that word, constitute necessary and even desirable conditions, as they seem to offer pre-conditions to a hoped-for release—a metaphor of
ironic mimicry of what the masses of serfs and, especially, of early industrial laborers underwent through numbing repetition in pointless arbitrary tasks, lost to hope. There is no symbiosis; the downtrodden serve as host to a parasitic minority, evidenced in the total erasure of a human/animal distinction in both Rainsford’s philosophy and Zaroff’s hunts. Yet as entirely mythic constructions, neither Rainsford nor Zaroff are susceptible to self-correction through introspection as the story will show, the former driving to the ends of the earth seeking ever escalating and conscience-deadening thrills, while the latter in purblindness flaunts his “triumphs” over his human adversaries by mounting shamelessly but tellingly the trophy heads of his “new collection” on his library’s walls (Connell, “Game 17”), even while indelibly associating himself with a doomed aristocracy by choosing to live in a chateau, humming tunes from the Folies Bergere, and employing a series of French terms for foods and beverages. Ever the consummate imperialist, in the story’s finale he hums Madame Butterfly, that paean to racism and militaristic excesses.

Replicating Rainsford’s man-animal conflation, he regards the lower classes as “mongrels” (Connell, “Game” 16), a term most commonly used for canines, and philosophizes that God creates some men “‘kings, some beggars’” (Connell, “Game” 14), suggesting a secondary conflation of the mythical with the biblical: his beloved dog, significantly named Lazarus, had been killed in a previous hunt, “‘the finest hound in my pack’” (Connell, “Game” 19), evoking the parable in Luke 16 concerning the lack of compassion between “a certain rich man” who “fared sumptuously every day” and the “beggar named Lazarus.” Upon their deaths the former, still separated from the beggar by “a great gulf,” or hubristic distance, suffers hellish “torments” (19-31). Members of the lower classes are de-valued as persons, representing only a useful collective animal energy. Indeed, Lazarus-Cerberus has been superseded by the servant Ivan, a brute of species-blurring animalistic force, a powerful id figure.

Even though manhunting practiced as a “game” represents a pinnacle experience for the General it takes place within a dawning recognition that the winning of it does nothing to assuage the yearning after an unattained sense of self-worth, a truth he has already grasped in dismay, despite the bluff and gilded exterior. As Sisyphus, rich-man Zaroff has scaled the varied “pinnacles” of hedonistic elitism and has already tasted the ineluctable ennui. For him the hunt was no longer a challenge: “‘I always got my quarry. Always. There is no greater bore than
perfection’” –unless it would be perfect repetition. His declaration is followed by the Hellenistic remark, “‘When I thought of this it was a tragic moment for me’” (Connell, “Game” 14, 15). In a parallel to Rainsford’s current quest, he also had “‘started up the Amazon to hunt jaguars, for I had heard they were unusually cunning. They weren’t’” (Connell, “Game” 14). Release from an imprisoning hubris must come from within, in this case from another version of himself. Because he is a shade, suicide is not an option for Zaroff; instead, his only hope is to have his bloated hubris pierced by Rainsford’s hunting knife or, alternatively, by a stake sharpened by it. Consequently, when he has Rainsford treed, to be easily shot and killed, he desists, allowing the game to proceed to its necessary and inevitable conclusion.

Unlike the captured sailors locked in Zaroff’s “training school,” (“‘Sometimes an angry god... sends them to me’” [Connell, “Game” 16]), Rainsford almost exactly matches the General in hunting proficiency. His physical resemblance is close to perfect also, as he all too easily slips into Zaroff’s borrowed clothes that “came from a London tailor who ordinarily cut and sewed for none below the rank of duke” (Connell, “Game” 12). Not himself quite at the hill’s pinnacle, Rainsford is initially reluctant to enter the game to which he has been brought under duress, invoking arguments of scruple against it and refusing to view the General’s special display of human heads (inadvertently seen by him in the first movie version), in denial of his actual, parasitic role in a larger world scheme. Now a captive in the chateau, he looks down from his room to the moonlit courtyard where “the hounds heard him at the window and looked up, expectantly, with their green eyes,” the pack a multi-headed Cerberus (Connell, “Game” 17). Yet play he must, the Sisyphean task having been foreordained: “‘...I have played the fox, now I must play the cat of the fable’” (Connell, “Game” 19)—that is, he must begin the empathetic process of understanding social victimization. During the chase, he must fight off “panic” (Connell, “Game” 19), a sense of a tormenting Pan who gave Artemis her pack of hunting dogs, whose conch horn sounded in hunts much like the General’s baying hounds, now unchained, and who could be counted upon to inspire sudden fear in lonely places—fully a scourge to all hunted game. Just before dawn Rainsford achieves some rest in a treetop, “although the silence of a dead world was on the jungle” (Connell, “Game” 20; emphasis added). When Zaroff closes in, Rainsford’s “impulse was to hurl himself down like a panther” (Connell, “Game” 20), to become literally the embodiment of a victim in an ultimate blurring of any human-animal distinction, the forced inculcation of an object lesson. He too desists, and the hunt through the jungle takes on
the cyclical character of a Keatsian Grecian urn, negating closure and resolution. Finally unable to climb higher Rainsford plunges twenty feet down to the sea below, only to resurface later in Zaroff’s bedroom.

Though the exact method of dispatching Zaroff can not be known, the General’s last words, “On guard, Rainsford. . . .” (Connell, “Game” 23) evoke a duel (and a dual, both words associated with duo, two [L.]) of phallic points, as well as embodying an ironic warning to beware his, Rainsford’s, own fate—after all, the American’s hubris is still “intact,” still ripe for deflationary bursting; indeed, Rainsford’s first thoughts after his conquest are not about freeing the exploited men in the dungeon, but of the splendid “bed” he has gained, the “canopied bed big enough for six men” (Connell, “Game” 12), generously procrustean for Rainsford to grow to Zaroff’s proportions: it continues to be a “man’s world,” and a sexual parallel asserts itself in that the imprisoned sailors may have furnished Zaroff with sport in two ways, and may now do so for Rainsford as well. (In the 1932 cinematic version actor Fay Wray as prey furnishes a perhaps more “conventional” sexual aspect.)

As an archetypal story the myth of Sisyphus here becomes liberal democracy’s vehicle for critiquing the collective hubris stemming from feudalistic international capitalism ultimating in a vicious dehumanization. In Tono-Bungay H. G. Wells’s George Ponderevo, himself entrapped in a numbing cycle engendered of social-historical forces (“an epoch of such futility”), had articulated his agony over the same cultural determinism:

‘Great God!’ I cried, ‘but is this Life?’

For this the armies drilled, for this the Law was administered and the prisons did their duty, for this the millions toiled and perished in suffering, in order that a few of us should build palaces we never finished, make billiard-rooms under ponds, run imbecile walls round irrational estates, scorch about the world in motor-cars, devise flying-machines, play golf and a dozen such foolish games of ball, crown into chattering dinner parties, gamble and make our lives one vast dismal spectacle of witless waste! So it struck me then, and for a time I could think of no other interpretation. This was Life! It came to me like a revelation, a
revelation at once incredible and indisputable of the abysmal folly of our being.

(376)

Within the cycles of divinely imposed punishment through torture, that is, within the myths and parables themselves, whether that of Ixion’s wheel or Tantalus’s temptations or Sisyphus’s boulder-rolling or the searing fate of “a certain rich man,” qualitative choices are illusory and ultimately unavailing (Prometheus notwithstanding), the only utility of the myths being in their object-lesson. Rainsford does learn to feel the fear of the victim but it is unaccompanied by any deeper recognition or remorse. Both Rainsford’s and Zaroff’s socio-economic status is confessedly based on luck, the fortunes of inheritance, uncontrollable circumstance. Though initially innocent of wrong each has also inherited a corruptibility, as seen in the arranged luck practiced by the General when he “[helps] Providence a bit” (Connell, “Game” 16) by falsifying a navigable channel to shipwreck victims for his hunts; and in the more or less self-conscious aggrandized exploitation and denigration of a laboring class by “big business” to which Rainsford appears connected—both situations representing attitudes susceptible of reform. One is reminded of the different ends to which Conrad, for instance, would use similar material. His Secret Sharer would likewise endure an arduous swim, taking him to that dark region of the Underworld at Hades’ frontier to unite with his own doppelganger, also his senior, in order to effect a renovation of character:

Walking to the taffrail, I was in time to make out, on the very edge of a darkness thrown by a towering black mass like the very gateway of Erebus—yes, I was in time to catch an evanescent glimpse of my white hat left behind to mark the spot where the secret sharer of my cabin and of my thoughts, as though he were my second self, had lowered himself into the water to take his punishment: a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny. (Conrad, “The Secret Sharer” 699)

The failure of the present story’s bifurcated character, like that of George Ponderevo, to achieve the release “he” seeks and remain trapped in a mesmeric cycle of materialism and callous social indifference, the inherited “rock” he is doomed to struggle with, is of less import than is the object-lesson of moral therapy it presents—a recognition that having a materialistic “all” requires
forfeiting an enabling humanitarian compassion that alone can bring lasting peace and an uncorrupted sense of integrity.

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Notes

1. Of 300 short stories this is Connell’s only survivor, the others, together with his novels, having long dropped from print. He was to move on to become a quite successful Hollywood screen writer, both solo and as a co-writer. None of his subsequent writing has the serious edge of the “Game,” tending more toward the lightly comedic. He continued, however, to deal frequently with his theme of building bridges between common types and tycoons (see note 4, below): in the novel The Mad Lover (1927) a millionaire falls in love with a poor girl and changes his ways; in the film Two Girls and a Sailor (1944) middle class women and a millionaire join forces in a worthy cause; and in the film Her Highness and the Bellboy (1945) a European princess falls for a reporter. (A useful amateur website dealing with the range of Connell’s work can be found at http://www.intercoursewiththedead.com/conbio.htm.) My own first acquaintance with this short story was through a comic book version just after the war; the Rainsford character was a pilot, essentially and characteristically a predator elevated above the souls he stalked, who became the sole survivor of a B-25 Mitchell bomber that had crashed on an island. Years later upon reading Connell I made the story connection.

2. In his article “‘Of Two Classes’: Social Darwinism in Richard Connell’s ‘The Most Dangerous Game’” Terry W. Thompson with ironic approbation characterizes the story as “merely a superficial read, a prose comic book with all the essential ingredients of an exciting thriller . . .” (73), an ultra-jingoistic vehicle that applies a Darwin-Spenser survivalist manifesto to social history. As I hope my own reading of the story will show, for Connell the movement from European feudalism to American capitalism is simple hegemonic transformation, a mythopoetic view of history (itself at times a dangerous game) of such widespread acceptance that Connell could be certain his surface storyline would initially be so uncritically recognized as to produce (self-) righteous celebration.
Connell’s profound artistic achievement is to challenge the tyrannizing, popular epic mythologies of modern nations that too often guide policy. The story functions as a disenchanter, urging the perceptive reader to question the currents of historical determinism through individual psychological and moral renovation.

3. In 1919 Ford began the import of Model Ts through Ford do Brazil.

4. This is a theme Connell would return to more than a decade later (1936) in his B-novel *Playboy*, a book rife with Russian ex-pat aristocrats, in which a protagonist of vast, inherited wealth, Hermanus (“Mike”) Van Dyke (known sardonically in the popular press as “Million-a-Year Mike”), undergoes a Scrooge-like conversion after working voluntarily and incognito for four months in one of his five-and-dime type stores, suffering extreme privation:

   He felt it was almost impossible for him, born to wealth and with his future assured, to appreciate the full weight of the fear that was never far from [his “fellow employees”], but he felt he had come to have a partial understanding of it. (236)

   Repentant, he proposes marriage to his firm’s personnel manager. Together they will chuck the chain store’s draconian employment policies and replace them with humane rules.

5. Not surprisingly Homer’s epic includes a brief mention of Sisyphus in Book XI.

6. The latest vessel wrecked on the rocks of Zaroff’s fake “channel” was “‘the Spanish bark San Lucar’” (sic; Connell, “Game” 16).

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