

# A PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM OF RICHARD CONNELL'S 'THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME'

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## ABSTRACT

Reading involves interaction between the text and the readers. During this interaction, readers are practising literary critic, which is defined as an activity attempting to study, analyze, interpret and evaluate a work of art. There are different schools of criticism in interpreting literary texts such as Marxist critics, readers-response critics and New Historicism. This paper looks at the psychoanalytic approach, which applies Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis methods of interpreting works of literature. Freud believed that a literary text is the writer's dream and fantasy, thus, it can be analyzed like a dream. This paper also attempts to apply this psychoanalytic criticism onto 'The Most Dangerous Game' written by Richard Connell to uncover the real meaning of the text.

**Keywords :** Psychoanalytic Criticism, Psychoanalytic Approach

## INTRODUCTION

Reading is an active activity. As any piece of writing being read, it involves interaction between the text itself and a variety of people, i.e the readers. By being an active participant in the interaction, a reader often attempts to answer questions or reacts to the conflicts evoked by the texts. In doing so, readers are said to have become practising literary critics. Literary criticism, is described by Matthew Arnold, a nineteenth century literary critic, as 'a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world' (in Daiches, 1981, p2). Implicitly, literary criticism is defined as 'a disciplined activity that attempts to study, analyze, interpret, and evaluate a work of art' (in Daiches, 1981, p2). It is through this activity that readers are able to explore questions that can help them define humanity, evaluate actions, not to mention to increase appreciation and enjoyment of a literary work.

There are different schools of criticism founded by different groups of readers and critics that use different theories and methodologies in interpreting literary texts. For example, the Marxist critics focus on social and historical concerns in a text. On the other hand, the readers-response critics concentrate on the readers' personal reactions to the text. New Historicism, which emerges in the 1980s and 1990s, assumes that history and fiction cannot be separated, therefore, a text must be analyzed through historical research. These various schools have offered many options to the readers on how a literary text can be examined. Thus, in their reading process, readers can choose or engage in any school of criticism to broaden their knowledge based on their understanding of a text as well as being tolerant for other people's beliefs and perception of society and culture.

## PSCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM

Psychoanalytic criticism, unlike other schools of criticism, can be used with any other critical method of interpretation. This is because this approach attempts to explain the reasons of human actions. Bressler (1994, p89) suggested that psychoanalytic criticism is more an approach to literary criticism than any particular school of criticism. This psychoanalytic approach applies the Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis methods of interpreting works of literature. Based on what Freud's belief that a literary text is the writer's dream and fantasy, the text, then can be analyzed like a dream. Freud suggested that by using the psychoanalysis method, the real meaning of a text can be uncovered.

Many of us have surely attempted to interpret our dreams or even others'. Many have also connected dreams with their true feelings, concerns and actions. Do dreams contain any truth or serve any useful functions? Interestingly enough, there have been some circumstances that affirmatively answer this question. For instance, Kekule, a chemist, who had been investigating the molecule structure of benzene, dreamed of a string of atoms in the shape of snake swallowing its tail. Having drawn this figure when he woke up, he realized that it was the graphic structure of the benzene ring he had been struggling to unravel all this while.

Another example that shows the value of dreams is through the success of 'The Devil's Trill Sonata', a composition produced by Giuseppe Tartini, a famous Italian violinist in the eighteenth century. Tartini, in his dream, accepted the devil's offer to help him finish a difficult sonata he had been working on, in exchange for his soul. Upon his agreement, the devil picked up the violin and completed his unfinished composition. When he woke up, Tartini wrote the sonata based on his memory of this unusual dream. This piece, which he titled 'The Devil's Trill Sonata' became his best-know composition.

Authors, too, have claimed that they have received some of their best ideas from their dreams. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, for example, was claimed and declared by the author, Robert Louis Stevenson, as coming directly from his nightmares. Other writers like Dante, Goethe, Blake and Bunyan also admitted that much of their famous writings were inspired from their world of dreams.

The above examples show that dreams are fascinating. Sometimes, it seems to contain a degree of truth in it (especially in the above examples). However, it also seems that when we dream, we have very little control of our mind of what happens (in the dreams). This had led scientists to explore this 'uncontrollable' part of which they called the unconscious.

One of the earliest investigators of the activities of the unconscious was Sigmund Freud, a Viennese neurologist and psychologist. Freud's findings are very significant as the application of his methods of psychoanalysis on to the interpretations of works of literature become what we term as psychoanalytic criticism.

Freud founded a new model of how humans' minds work. He theorized :

... hidden from the workings of the conscious mind, the unconscious plays a large part in how we act, think and feel. The best avenue for discovering some of the content and activity of the unconscious is through our dreams... It is the interaction of the conscious and unconscious, and

either one working in isolation, by which we shape ourselves and our world.

(in Bressler, 1994, p88)

Freud then developed a theoretical and practical method of treating emotional and psychological disorders with the patients talking freely (in a patient-analyst setting) about his experience and dreams.

Theoretically, Freud believed that the root of his patients' problem was psychological, not physical. He believed, they 'have suppressed incestuous desires with which they and unconsciously refused to deal,' thus, suggested that the 'storehouse for these desires was the unconscious, the part of the psyche or mind that receives and stores our hidden desires, ambitions, fears, passions and irrational thoughts' (in Bressner, 1994, p89). He further theorized that the unconscious motivates most of our actions. However, our reasoning and analytical skills would be responsible for our actions. In other words, the conscious part of our minds would determine whether any of the actions (motivated by the unconscious) would be carried out. Thus, Freud further formulated another theory that our minds consisted of three main parts, instead of the dichotomy of the conscious and unconscious mentioned earlier:

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|------|-----------------|---|--|
| i.   | <i>id</i>       | - | the irrational, instinctual, unknown and unconscious part of the mind;                   |
| ii.  | <i>ego</i>      | - | the rational, logical, waking part; and  |
| iii. | <i>superego</i> | - | acts like an internal censor, to make moral judgements in the light of social pressures. |

(Bressner, 1994, p90)

Thus, it can be understood here that the ego, acts like a mediator between the id's desire and the demands of social pressure represented by the superego. Hence, according to Freud, what the ego 'deems unacceptable it suppresses and deposits in the unconscious' (in Bressner, 1994, p90). It is in dreams that the unconscious expresses its suppressed wishes and desires. However, when certain feelings cannot be released through dreams, the ego would block any outward response. In blocking the outward response, the ego and the id would involve in an internal battle or conflict which Freud termed as *neurosis*. According to Freud, neurosis can display itself in many physical and psychological abnormalities. In regards to literature, this is when neurosis plays an important role. Freud believed that the unresolved conflicts that give rise to neurosis constitute elements of a piece of literature. In his theory, he believed that a work of literature was the external expression of the author's unconscious mind, and therefore, the work must be treated like a dream in order to uncover the author's hidden motivations, desires and wishes. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, the psychoanalysis method, when applied to literature interpretation is called psychoanalytic criticism.

Therefore, Freud's theory can be summed up by assuming that all writers are neurotic. Only the writers can escape the results of neurosis (like madness) by using their writing as an escapism in expressing their unresolved desires and wishes, thus, bring them back to sanity.

Freud strongly believed that an author writes to indulge in some secret desire and wish. In other words, any work produced by an author is actually his or her dream and fantasy. Thus, psychoanalytic critics believe that a literary text can and must be analyzed like a dream. By employing Freud's psychoanalytic techniques (used in a

dream therapy), we can unlock or uncover the hidden meanings throughout the story and, thus, arrive at any accurate interpretation of the text.

On the whole, psychoanalytic criticism relies heavily on Freud's theories on the underlying motivations regarding our actions. Thus, psychoanalytic criticism initially focused mainly on the author. By understanding the author's background, which can be done through biographies and by scrutinizing his or her written work, it is believed that we can understand the author's personality, theoretically, and, thus, understand the internal and external conflicts, and most importantly, the neuroses. By gaining an in-depth understanding of the author, psychoanalytic critics believe that it can expose the hidden meaning or wishes of the author in the texts. Thus, the author's canon could be better interpreted.

However, in the 1950s, critics had shifted from understanding the texts through the understanding of the author's personality to an exploration of the characters, both minds and actions, in the texts. The focus now is more on the characters. Thus, this requires an active participation from the readers. Not only the readers have to understand the characters through the authors' point of view, they must also formulate their own conceptions of the characters' personality. Thus, readers are not merely contributing to the authors' ideas and views. Instead, the readers' active participation and conception become the integral part of the interpretation of the texts.

Most psychoanalytic critics believe that this approach leads to a more comprehensive analysis of a literary work. They believe that by directly applying Freud's psychoanalytic techniques of dream analysis, personality development, and psychological theories, 'we can dive beneath the surface level of a text and ascertain its true meaning and that it can help us discover the truth that lies within each of us' (Klein, 1976, p34). In addition, readers also need to bring together their own background knowledge and experience to come to the understanding of a text. In other words, readers need an understanding of themselves from a Freudian point of view, that is, how a human's mind develop, and the context of their own world. Both are essential in order to interpret the other people's thoughts – in this case, the literary written texts.

Another 'tool' suggested by Freud in analyzing the text in the light of this criticism is the symbols or images in our dreams. According to Freud, the suppressed wishes and desires were hard for the conscious psyche or mind to handle, without feeling angry or hatred. Thus, in order to soften the desires and wishes, the unconscious will present them through symbols and images. These symbols and images may not be a direct picture or object of the real thing, however, the unconscious asserts its influence over a person's, i.e the dreamer's, motivations and behaviour. Thus, this becomes the technique of a writer, where through the process of what Freud termed as *displacement*, a person's feeling may be written in a form of symbols or images. For example, a person's anger may be symbolized as the *rage of the sun*.

### **A PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM OF 'THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME'**

Written more than seventy years ago, *The Most Dangerous Game* tells a daunting story about a man's dream and passion for hunting. It illustrates the internal and external conflicts of the antagonist in the story, General Zaroff, a veteran hunter, who gets tired of animal hunting as the huntees provide no challenge for him. Along the line, the story also illustrates the battle that the protagonist, Sanger Rainsford, has to

face, internally and externally, when he becomes involved accidentally and unwillingly in a dangerous hunting game proposed by Zaroff.

**'The Most Dangerous Game'** begins with the scene on the yacht where Rainsford and his friend, Whitney, are having conversation about hunting. It is at night and their yacht is passing by a mysterious island called "Ship-Trap Island". The suspense begins when Rainsford accidentally falls off the yacht and he has to swim to the island to save his life. On the island, he meets Zaroff and his assistant, Ivan. Rainsford discovers that Zaroff is a very rich man who has a passion for hunting. At first, Rainsford feels quite comfortable with Zaroff because they share the same interest. However, to Rainsford's horror, he discovers that, to Zaroff, hunting animals has lost its appeal since the animals cannot think, and therefore, cannot give him challenge anymore. In pursuit of his ultimate enjoyment in hunting, Zaroff spends his time hunting men, who according to him are the only 'animals' that can think and reason. To ensure that he will have enough supplies for his hunting game, Zaroff traps sailors to the Ship-Trap Island which he purposely buys and maintains exclusively for his game. Rainsford strongly opposes to this bizarre and insane idea of hunting men as a game because to him it can be considered as murder. Zaroff, on the other hand, is very delighted with Rainsford's arrival to his island since the latter is a renowned hunter who has written books on hunting expedition. With his brain and intelligence, Zaroff believes that Rainsford would be the greatest challenge for him to hunt. After a heated dispute, Zaroff gives Rainsford two alternatives – either go to the jungle and becomes the huntee for the hunting game, or die at the hand of Ivan, his assistant. Being a courageous person, Rainsford chooses to fight for his life and Zaroff promises him that if he is still alive at the end of the third day, he would be released. Thus, the most 'dangeorus game' begins. For three days Rainsford becomes the prey for Zaroff's insane idea of good hunting. He uses all his knowledge on tricks in hunting to save his precious life. It is then that he realizes the fear of being hunted. At the end of the third day, Rainsford manages to kill Ivan with one of his tricks and escape Zaroff through the ocean. Zaroff admits his defeat but he has the shock of his life when Rainsford appears in his room on the same night. Caught unguarded, Zaroff cannot escape Rainsford's wish to take revenge and also to save himself. At the very last moment of his life, Zaroff feels the fear of being the huntee, just like how Rainsford and other victims feel.

Having looked at the plot summary of the story, we know that Connell is actually writing about his own internal battle. The story is written as a result of his neurosis, that his repressed feelings which cannot be released in his dreams. Thus, this piece of writing becomes his external expression of his unconscious mind.

A thorough reading of this story brings us to the understanding that Rainsford, the protagonist, is actually Connell himself. Having known of his background in the army during the World War I, one can easily perceive that the hunting game mentioned in this story is not about a simple, normal or an ordinary hunting game. It is written as a symbol of a battlefield in the war. The author is trying to reveal the ugly truth about war that seems to disturb his mind. Here, he is showing the injustice done to people due to the cruelty of war. This terrible and shocking revelation is what Connell intends the readers to know his feeling of disgust of the matter. It is horrifying to know that for some people, war is only a game, that other people's lives are worthless. His daunting experience of being a hunter and a huntee is written symbolically throughout the story.

By accidentally falling off the yacht and arriving at the island, shows that he is involved in the battle involuntarily – which is very true as all the young men have to register for the National Service. In other words, those soldiers who fight in the war

are victims of circumstances – they are trapped in their innocence. Once they go to war, the chance of them coming back alive is very slim or almost none. By agreeing to participate in the war, they are actually putting their lives at stake, just as agreeing to Zaroff's insane idea of a hunting game.

A deeper understanding of the story may lead the reader to interpret that this is a real happening during the World War I. The innocent victims may not be the soldiers themselves, but may be referred to Jews during the Nazis occupation in German and Zaroff may be identified as Hitler.

Having carefully studied the character of Rainsford, we can conceptualize that he represents the unwilling fighters in a real war. However, he cannot escape from taking part since it is for his own survival; that he, in the first place, join the war not because he wants to, but due to some unfortunate circumstances, in his case, the national service force. Here, Connell is putting himself in two situations – that in a war, one can become the 'hunter' and the 'huntee' at the same time. Through Rainsford, Connell illustrates the image of a soldier in a war – that he has to be an *'expert hunter'* (p4) in order to survive. In this story, Rainsford's expertise is proved by Whitney's remark about his ability to *'pick off a moose moving in the brown tall bush at four hundred yards'* (p1). Furthermore, he can recognize the type of gun when he sees only an empty cartridge on the island (p3). One must also observant in war. Rainsford's observant character is shown through his notice of minute details when he is at Zaroff's house – the decorations and ornaments are noted thoroughly and explicitly, and so is the description of Zaroff's features (p4). Rainsford's act of courageous shows that he is a true fighter – a quality demanded of a soldier in war. He does not lose his nerves nor does he give up easily even though he faces great danger and time is running out especially when he is being hunted by Zaroff. Connell also shows that in war, one has to be firm, even though he has to be cold-hearted or cold-blooded, in order to survive. Rainsford does not even care *'how a jaguar feels'* (p1) and he feels lucky that he is born the hunter (p1). However, as Freud suggested, the ego would control the dreams and desires of a human. Thus, Connell successfully supports this when he proposes that no matter how cruel a man is demanded by the situation, there is still some humanity in him. Rainsford's argument with Zaroff: *'Thank you, I am a hunter, not a murderer'* (p7) illustrates this point. His refusal of what the latter proposes as a 'good' hunting shows that although he is an avid hunter, he strongly and firmly believes that hunting men is still the biggest crime and *'did not make me condone to cold-blooded murder!'* (p7).

Connell also illustrates the real picture of war – that we do not win all the time; that we can become the huntees too. So, by having Rainsford as Zaroff's huntee, Connell paints the picture of the reversed situation, that Rainsford *'then knows how an animal at bay feels'* (p12) and *'then it was that Rainsford knew the full meaning of terror'* (p11). By saying that *'the jaguars understand the fear of pain and fear of death'* (p1), illustrates clearly the feeling of people fighting in the war – the feeling of fear when facing death.

Zaroff, on the other hand, represents the power behind the war. He is the one who starts the war and sees that it continues even though the victims are not the willing players. He does not give people chance to refuse as the options given are death that *'he needs not play that game if he doesn't wish to. If he does not wish to hunt, I turn him over to Ivan. Ivan once had the honor of serving as official knouter to the Great White Czar, and he has his own ideas of sport'* (p8). The cruelty of this 'war-creator' is indescribable in the sense that even when there is no player for the game, he would create a way so that unfortunate people would unfortunately fall as his preys, for example, *'Sometimes an angry god of the high seas sends them to me.'*

*Sometimes, when Providence is not so kind, I help Providence a bit'* (p7). We can connect this to our real world. War happens all the time even though there is no real reason at all for it to be started in the first place. Yet, it happens because they are people like Zaroff, who wants them to happen and make them a realization.

*'Many noble Russians lost everything. I luckily, had invested heavily on American securities, so I shall never have to open a tearoom in Monte Carlo or drive a taxi in Paris'* (p5) and Rainsford notices that Zaroff's evening suit *'comes from a London tailor who ordinarily cut and sewed for none below the rank of Duke'* (p4). These quotations reveal that General Zaroff is a rich man. The wealth that he owns illustrates that people in power are people that have great wealth, who can manipulate the others to achieve their own wishes and dreams. For General Zaroff, killing other people is just a game – it is just like an *'outdoor chess'* (p9). Cruelty is, thus, seen as part of the enjoyment of the game.

Perhaps one of the reasons one starts a war is because he thinks that he is very powerful, thus, can afford to play with other people's lives without any feeling of guilt at all. Zaroff, in this story, believes that *'life is for the strong, to be lived by the strong, and if needs be, taken by the strong'* (p7). Thus, since he is strong, he believes that he has every right to kill the weaker people as *'the weak of the world were put here to give the strong pleasure'* (p7). He also believes that he is better than the others, that is why he *'hunt the scum of the earth : sailors from tramp ships – lassars, blacks, Chinese, whites, mongrels – a thoroughbred horse or a hound is worth more than a score of them'* (p7). However, a deeper understanding of the story would reveal the real reason why these people are killed. Zaroff, does not want the people with brain to survive as *'they are dangerous'* (p7) and can threaten his position.

The hunting victims, or the unfortunate sailors, represent the soldiers in any war, who have been made to participate due to unfortunate circumstances. They may also represents those in captivity, waiting for the day of judgment of their fate.

The hunting dogs, though are not human characters, can be perceived as angels of death. When Zaroff *'strike a tartar' during his hunting game*, and *'one almost did win,'* he *'eventually had to use the dogs'* (p8).

Connell uses several colour images in this story to illustrate his true feelings about the whole situation of war. He uses the colour black to describe the scene. The readers are warned even at the first scene of the story that it is not going to be a beautiful nor a peaceful story as the darkness of the midnight is described *'like moist, black velvet'* (p1). The darkness is further emphasized by Rainsford's inability to see as *'it was like trying to see through a blanket'* (p1). Metaphorically, this can be understood as the victims' inability to forecast what is waiting for them at the island. A deeper understanding would reach to a conclusion that in war, those who are involved, do not know their future, or to an extreme, do not even see the reasons they are fighting in it.

Zaroff's *'thick eyebrows'*, *'pointed military mustache'*, and *'eyes'* are described *'as black as the night'* (p4). The colour black used to describe General Zaroff's physical appearance represents the black image and the twisted mind of the people who think that killing other people is only a game. Thus, we can say that once the victims see Zaroff, their future may have gone black, that death awaits them!

The dogs that Zaroff uses for hunting his preys are also black. As mentioned earlier, they may represent the angles of death. It shows the bleak future of the victims that their lives will come to an end once they start the hunting game with Zaroff. Even if

they manage to escape the general, the dogs will finish them off – the dogs will complete Zaroff's failure by hunting them down and eventually kill them.

The colour black may also represent the evilness of war. There is nothing beautiful about going to war. For the hunter, even the victory may be sweet for him, it involves killing and death. For the hunted, of course, it is daunting and frightening. Black also represents the dark secret of the Ship-Trap Island. Only those who have been there know what is the real story. Similarly, in war, only those involved will know the real and ugly truth about it.

Another colour image used in the story is red, which is mentioned when Zaroff is '*eating borcsh, the red soup*' (p4). In addition, his smile shows '*red-lipped smile*' (p5). This colour represents the blood of the victims, both animals and human beings who are killed by the hunters. In a real war, this may represent the bloodshed of the victims in the battlefield. As for Zaroff and the people he represents in the real world, red may be a symbol of his thirst for blood.

The Ship-Trap Island symbolizes the battlefield. It is on the island that people are fighting for their lives, even the name 'Ship-Trap' suggests that people are trapped here – once they land on the island, there is no way of getting out except to fight. Similarly, there is no way people in the army can get out of battlefield without fighting.

The hunting game symbolizes the war. In any war, there are people hunting, and others who are being hunted. Also in any war, killing, or murdering cannot be avoided – that there will be people who kill and others who are being hunted. Also, in any war, killing or murdering cannot be avoided – that there will be people who kill and others being killed. Fighting is put up in order to survive.

Zaroff's passion for hunting men portrays his barbaric image which is very ironic since he insists on maintaining the best of civilization. Similarly, in the real world, the people who initiate war are those who claim themselves as more civilized than the others. Yet, their actions and thought do not reflect what they claim themselves are.

The struggle that Rainsford goes through depicts the hardships that war victims have to undergo. It also symbolizes the true spirit of war – that people who have hopes and courage will not give up their life easily.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this approach is helpful in developing a deep understanding of a literary text. By applying the method of understanding the minds of the authors and the characters created, as well as the techniques used in the texts, readers can unlock and uncover the hidden meanings of the story, and hence, arrive at an accurate interpretation of the text.

However, the major drawback of this approach is, it is only looking at from whose point of view the text is written. In 'The Most Dangerous Game', for example, the method of narration in this story is limited omniscient point of view. The point of view is restricted to what the protagonist, Rainsford, sees, feels and thinks. Thus, our perception will be very much based, and biased to a certain extent, on Rainsford's perception. We never know what is going on inside other characters' minds except the ones mentioned or observed by Rainsford.



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