

A Mountain Journey

Answer the following questions using complete sentences, and support your answers with evidence from the story.

1. What was Dave Conroy doing out in the wilderness? (motivation)
2. At what point does the reader know the protagonist is in serious trouble and not likely to make it to MacMoran's cabin? (plot)
3. What three critical mistakes did Conroy make? What are some of the things he could have done to prevent himself from freezing? (plot)
4. Determine the elements of plot in this story: exposition, complicating incident, 3 crises, climax, and the denouement.
5. Describe the setting – how does the setting affect the plot and the theme of the story? What is the theme – write a theme statement for this story.
6. Find one example of symbolic setting (concrete place that represents something abstract) and explain its meaning.
7. Quote four images from the story that make effective comparisons (figurative language: simile, metaphor, and personification)

A Mountain Journey Vocabulary

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|------------------|-------|
| 1. eternal | p.92 |
| 2. immobility | p.93 |
| 3. opaque | p.93 |
| 4. reverberation | p.93 |
| 5. momentum | p.93 |
| 6. cadaverous | p.94 |
| 7. congregated | p.95 |
| 8. inundation | p.95 |
| 9. beggared | p. 95 |
| 10. filched. | P. 96 |



Howard O'Hagan

A MOUNTAIN JOURNEY

Trapper Dave Conroy has travelled far and is alone in the winter wilderness. Though "bushed", he presses on toward safety, driven by a gnawing fear of death . . .

Dave Conroy, whose breath had hung stubby icicles on his moustache, paused upon the very summit of the pass. He tucked his ski poles under his arms, leaned upon them, sinking their discs into the creaking snow, and while he rested there panting, the cold was an old man's fingers feeling craftily through his clothes.

He was tired. He was so tired that his mouth was dry with the taste of salt. He was more tired than he had any right to be, and Hoodoo cabin on Hoodoo creek, where he could pass the night, was still five miles away. It was downhill now though, downhill all the way. For the first time during the long day he could stand back on his skis and let them carry him where he wished to go. Since daylight he had come twenty miles and climbed four thousand feet from the lower Smokey to the pass. On his shoulders he had lifted upwards with him at every step his pack of food for another five days on the trail, his blankets, axe and fifty pounds of fur for the market—the result of six weeks' trapping on the head of the Jack-pine. At every step too, he had broken trail and his skis had sunk a foot in the new snow, white and soft as flour.

He knew as he stood on the summit that he should have made camp two miles back in the timber and crossed the divide in the morning. Back there he had passed a fine spruce tree, its wide

branches sweeping low, so that close against its trunk, cradled in its roots, he had seen the brown mossy ground where no snow had fallen and where he might have made his fire and spread his blankets. That tree, like a strong and lonely woman, called to his weary body to stop. But two hours of daylight remained and he went on.

He thought that if he had waited another two weeks to come out, till March, the snow would have had a crust for travelling, the days would have been longer, the cold less severe. Anyway, a man was a fool to travel alone in the mountains, especially with a heavy pack, backing a fresh fall of snow. A man when he was alone would travel too far. He would travel till he could travel no more, for the mere sake of travelling, when a day or two's delay in the time of his arrival made no difference at all.

Still, the worst was over. It was downgrade now to the railroad, eighty miles of trail along the Snake Indian River with cabins to put up at every night. No more siwashing under trees, burrowing four feet down in the snow for a place to sleep, with a snow-covered tree sweating in the heat of his fire, dripping water on his neck and dampening his blankets. Not that under such conditions a man slept very much. It was too cold. If he slept, his fire slept with him. It was better to stay awake, his blankets over his shoulders, and a pile of wood handy at his elbow.

Up there on the pass it was very still. No wind blew and his breath rose white and yellow before him. His heart thumped and hissed in his breast, and the silence about him as he listened became a roar as if it were the roar of the grey earth rolling on through space and time. Behind him his ski trail stretched a few feet, two black lines with the webbed marks of his ski poles pacing beside them. Mist, like the shadow of universal darkness on the treeless summit, moved about him, searched every crevice of the mountain land, roamed in great billows, formed in the blindness and suffering of eternal homelessness.

Conroy turned his skis down the slope before him. He was beginning to feel like a ghost on an abandoned planet and he wanted to see the works of man about him once again. He longed for the sight of a cabin, a clearing in the forest, yellow flaming blazes on trees beside the trail. Snow, flung up by the prow of his skis, pattered lightly against his thighs and as he hummed downwards he

thought of supper—brown curled bacon, brown bannock, rice with butter melting on it, tea red and strong as rum.

The rolling alplands, a white sea frozen into weary immobility, became a broken parkland and he made long sweeping turns around clumps of spruce and balsam. Dark green trees came out of the thinning mist towards him, touched him with outflung branches, passed in a flutter and flurry of snow-dust. The cold wind against his face, the loud wind howling in crescendo by his ears, the flow of wind that pressed his trousers tight against his legs, gave him back strength as he exulted in the rush of his descent. Tears smarted in his eyes and through them he saw the landscape opaque and blurred as though it were vibrating to the speed of his passage.

He swung to the right in a wide telemark that threw snow in his face, swept down an open meadowland where the black tips of willows showed between two walls of timber, dropped off a cutbank to the frozen river, glanced a moment over his shoulder at the curved beauty of his ski trail on the hill above, curved and smooth and thin, like the tracing of a pen upon the snow.

And as he looked back, while still sliding forward with the momentum of his descent, the ice broke beneath him. It broke with a low muffled reverberation, startling as if the river had spoken. The snow rifted about him, the points of his skis dropped down. He was thrown forward and to save himself from falling on his face plunged down his hands. His pack slipped forward upon the back of his head and held him. The river was shallow and his hands rested on its gravelled bottom. He saw the snow melt around his wrists and flow into the top of his mittens, searing the flesh of his wrists like flame. He saw dark water streaming in furrows by his wrists and before he staggered upright again heard water tinkling over pebbles, murmuring, protesting, running downhill between ice and pebbles to the Arctic Ocean.

Conroy was too weak to rise beneath the pack. He rolled over upon his side, slipped the thongs of the ski poles from his wrists, dropped his pack on the snow beside him, raised himself and lifted his skis from the water. Water had seeped down his socks into his boots and his feet were cold and clammy.

He had fallen into an air hole. Probably a warm spring entered into the river nearby and above it the ice was thin. That was a peril of winter travel. But the rivers, levelled with ice and snow, were the

winter highways of the mountains, and a man, when he could, travelled along them in preference to breaking a heavy trail in the timber.

Conroy unclamped his skis, upended them, and stood knee-deep in the snow. Already the water on them had crusted into ice. He took off his sodden mittens, opened his clasp-knife, and tried to scrape the ice from the skis' running surface. He knew what he should do. He should stop, make a fire, dry his hands and feet, change his socks and mittens. But it was late. It would mean siwashing for another night underneath a tree. A biting wind was driving the mist back up the valley and the sun westering behind the ranges threw long feeble shadows across the snow. He was less than three miles from the cabin, and the promise of its warmth and comfort would not let him stop.

He wriggled his toes in his boots. They were cold, but perhaps, he thought, not wet. Only his ankles and heels seemed wet. If he hurried he could make it. He slammed his right foot back into his ski iron, bent down to clamp it to his ski, but his fingers already were numbed with the cold. He rose again, thrashed his arms about his shoulders, bringing the blood tingling to their tips, opened his pack sack and found a pair of woollen inner mitts. He would have to get along without the moose-hide outers. They were already frozen stiff and he put them into his pack.

His skis clamped to his feet at last, he hoisted his pack, took his poles and started off, hunching his toes to keep the circulation going. Ice on the bottom of the skis dragged heavily in the snow, but he fought against it, pushing on his poles, knowing that speed was his one means of escape from the cold hand of wilderness that pressed against his back.

The long white avenue of the river opened before him, lined on either side by tall spruce trees. The wind was rising with the sundown. It whipped snow against his face, cut through the weave of his woollen mitts, set the forest moaning beside him. He bent his head against it, his eyes on the black tapering points of his skis, ducking and dodging through the snow. It was as though he were engaged in some fantastic pursuit with those ski points always just beyond him, their tight cheeks pulled back into a cadaverous grin.

His shoulder muscles, as he lunged against the ski poles, bulged as though they would burst their skin, ached until their pain

became a cry within him. His legs moving back and beneath him seemed tireless. They could go on forever and he no longer knew whether he could stop them. The pain in his shoulders was the only reality of his existence and his body was no more than the shape of agony and effort crawling through the twilight, across the long shadows of spruce trees laid upon the snow.

He came up from the river through the timber into the cabin clearing. But no log walls rose to greet him. No closed door waited for his touch to open. He stood in the middle of the clearing where the cabin had been, hemmed about by swaying pine trees, pine trees that swayed as the wind sighed through them. Snow, as if it had garnered light from the day, cast upwards a shadowless glow and Conroy saw close to him the black butts of congregated logs, a corner of the cabin, draped in white, rising lonely as a monument left by men a hundred years ago.

Since he had passed that way, fire had gutted the cabin. A few log ends remained above ground. It was as though the cabin had subsided into the snow that rose like a slow inundation to cover it. A beggared moon from behind a grey rack of clouds wandered in the sky above the earth's desolation and in its light he perceived on the slope above him, where the fire had leaped from the cabin, stiff, branchless trees, like a parade of skeletons climbing up the mountainside.

The next cabin was at Blue Creek, eighteen miles down the river. It was farther than he had strength to go. He would camp here in the clearing where the cabin had been burned. He slipped his pack off and reached toward it for the handle of his axe to cut kindling, making shavings for his fire. His fingers refused to bend. Protected only by the woollen mitts, they were stiff with the cold. He beat his hands about his shoulders, flung his arms in circles, took off his mittens and rubbed his hands together in the snow, but felt no blood pulsing in his fingertips.

He bit his fingers. They were cold and white and unresponsive as a dead man's. His right thumb tingled; when he rubbed his hands across his face, his beard bristled on the palms. It was only his fingers that defied him. He had been a fool. He should have made a fire when he fell through the ice, and should have spent the night three miles up the river under a tree. He had always said that mountain travel was not dangerous if a man knew how to take care

of himself. Any man who froze his hands or feet had only himself to blame . . .

As he stood there, stamping on his skis, his arms flapping at his sides, he remembered Duncan Macdonald, who trapped in the Beaver River country and who had walked thirty miles to the railroad on frozen feet to have them amputated by the doctor. Because he could trap no more, Macdonald had opened a cobbler's shop in Jasper to make boots he could no longer wear himself, and Conroy saw him now at his bench, laughing, not saying anything at all, just laughing, his red face wrinkled as he nodded his heavy bald head and laughed.

Conroy decided that his hands were not frozen, his feet, which he could no longer feel in his boots, not frozen. They were only numb. He needed fire to warm them. Since he could not make kindling, since he could not bend his fingers around the shaft of his axe, he would set a tree afire, he would set the forest in a blaze around him and warm himself in its midst. Small dry twigs under a spruce tree would flame like paper. Putting his left wrist over his right, he forced his right hand into the pocket where he carried his match-safe. He pried it out and it fell into the snow at his feet. He spread his skis and leaned down to pick it up. He poked his hands into the snow. They were like two sticks of wood on the ends of his arms and shoved the safe deeper and farther from him. He stooped lower still and finally, pressing it between his wrists, filched it out. He held it there before him, at arm's length, a round tin cylinder that contained the red flame and blustering smoke of fire. His right thumb, still moving to his command, pressed it into his palm, but his fingers would not catch it, would not twist it open. They would not bring the match-safe to him. They held it from him. If they would only bend, those fingers. If they would understand when he spoke to them.

He looked about him as if he would find the realities of his situation in the snow at his feet. He was eighty miles from the railroad, a journey of four days. Unable to light a fire, without warmth or food, he would never make it. His fingers were frozen. His feet probably were frozen too. He had one chance. Across the river from Hoodoo Creek where he stood, a high pass led over into the Moose River. Frank MacMoran trapped up there and had his cabin on Terrace Creek. From Hoodoo Creek to Terrace Creek was

no more than ten miles. If he left his pack behind, he could probably pull through. He had never finished a day in the mountains yet without another ten miles up his sleeve.

His back was wet with sweat from carrying the pack, and he shivered with the cold. The cold was nibbling at him, at his nose, at his cheeks, crawling like a wet thing across his back. He forced his hands into his mittens, shoved them through the thongs of his ski poles and started off. He did not need to grasp the poles tightly. His hands rested upon the thongs which bore the weight he put upon them. His fingers did not pain him. He felt no sensations in them at all and his feet might have been pieces of wood strapped within his ski boots.

He crossed the river and angled up the slope towards the ridge that lay between him and the Moose. When he came out of the timber, the moon threw his shadow on the snow, a shadow faltering and stooped as if at any minute it might leave him, send him on alone to go shadowless through the moonlight. His shadow became a burden, something he pulled beside him in the snow.

He climbed high above the timber. The wind blew before him the long ends of the red neckerchief that he wore tied around the collar of his mackinaw, and near him the moon threw the outlines of a peak black upon the snow, black as ink seeping through the snow. Conroy paused a moment, leaned against a snow bank, sank down into it and rested.

How good to rest! How soft and warm the snow! There was the valley below him, empty in the moonlight—the clearing in the forest, timber that looked small and black as marsh grass. Across from him was a line of peaks thrust up against the sky, notched and jagged as if old bones, half-covered with the snow, littered their crests. To his left was the pass, a low saddle in the mountains, where he had crossed in the afternoon.

From below, somewhere in the forest, a wolf howled.

Conroy glanced upwards over his shoulder. He had still six hundred feet to climb to the ridge above the Moose, above the cabin at Terrace creek where MacMoran waited. MacMoran would take him in, feed him, make a fire for him to sit beside. He gathered his muscles together, summoned his strength that was slipping from him like a loosened garment. Then he lay back for another moment, to rest.

When he opened his eyes again, the moon had gone. The red sun, topping the range across the valley, shone upon him. His neckerchief flapped in the wind on the snow beside his cheek. He had slipped lower, fallen over upon his side, his face turned towards the route he had followed where his half-obliterated ski trail led down to the timber, the stunted spruce and balsam that seemed to be on their way towards him.

He heard horse bells. It was winter and no horses were within a hundred miles. He heard streaming river water. He heard a wide brown river running over mossy boulders between low banks of grass and willow. Across the valley he saw a cottage he had never seen before—a white cottage, low-roofed, with green trees beside it and an open door.

Then he remembered that he was on his way to MacMoran's cabin on Terrace Creek. MacMoran would be waiting for him. He tried to rise, but his arms stayed still at his side. Snow had drifted over them. A weight was on them that he could not lift. They were heavy with the burden of their own inertia. Snow like a blanket covered his body and the wind blew snow against his face.

For a moment he thought again of Macdonald who had brought his frozen feet to the railroad. Macdonald frowned and shook his head, opened his mouth and spoke some words that Conroy could not hear.

They would come and get him, Conroy thought—Macdonald, MacMoran, someone would come and get him. They were camped now down by Hoodoo cabin. They would see his trail and come and get him. He would lie for a while and wait.

Later, the pale cold sun was high in the sky. It shone full upon him. But the light of the sun was dim, as if a brighter light shone from behind it and the sunlight was its shadow. He could not see across the valley now, where the white cottage with the open door and the green trees had been. The world was growing small, dying slowly in the darkness of the sunlight.

Responding

1. What was Dave Conroy doing out in the wilderness?
2. At what point does the reader know the protagonist is in serious trouble and not likely to reach MacMoran's cabin?
3. What three critical mistakes did Conroy make? What are some things he could have done to prevent himself from freezing?
4. What effect does the setting of the story have on the plot and theme?
5. How is this story similar to others you have read or heard about people in the wilderness? How is it different?
6. Using details from the story, sketch a scene which might be used to illustrate this selection in a magazine such as *Reader's Digest*.

Student notes, page 245

