

Touching the Void-Key Contexts and Themes

KEY CONTEXTS:

Joe Simpson-the author:

- Joe is a climber, motivational speaker and author.
- Born in Kuala Lumpur in 1960, he lived in Gibraltar for part of his childhood.
- As a young climber he would often attempt routes that were beyond his experience.
- Simpson was told he would never climb again after the accident in Peru, but he has continued to climb and act as a mountain guide since.

A Century of Discovery:

- The twentieth century was characterised by a need to explore and discover unknown lands.
- Mount Everest was first climbed by Hillary and Norgay in 1953 and the first man landed on the moon in 1969.
- In the novel Joe describes how he and Simon long to be the first to climb Siula Grande by the west face.
- It highlights the idea of people facing challenges that appear insurmountable as well as showing their spirit of ambition.

Cutting the Rope:

- Simon faced criticism, verbal attacks and assaults when he returned from the Siula Grande expedition-known as, 'The man who cut the rope.'
- Many climbers believed he had broken one of the most important rules of climbing by cutting the rope.
- Joe says one of the reasons he wrote the book was to exonerate Simon from any blame and point out how he had saved his life.
- The **rope** is seen as a **symbol of trust**-Joe mentions the unspoken bond, how one will venture forward and the other hangs back to look out for the leader.
- In the novel Simon gets to tell his version of events and in the end Joe thanks him for saving his life.

Cultural Differences:

- The setting of the book, Siula Grande-Andes, Peru, South America is a remote area with a simple way of life.
- The area was colonised by the Spanish because of rich mineral deposits but it is now mainly an agricultural area. It is barely populated and famous for trekking.
- The locals' way of life is different from ours. They are used to surviving in harsh conditions. Young women tend to the cows alongside their father; young children look after cattle. They are shown to be hardy and practical in their way of life.

KEY THEMES:

Friendship and Trust:

- There is a close bond between the two climbers-they can act without discussion.
- The rope is the symbol of trust between them. When near the summit, Simon falls and it is the rope that saves him from the fall as he is attached to Joe and Joe has been watching the situation cautiously.
- This is what makes the cutting of the rope such a symbolic act, as it appears to break the unspoken trust that climbers must share to climb successfully together.
- The survival of their friendship is one of the most important aspects of the book.
- Joe points out by cutting the rope, Simon saved his life and the book is a defence of this point.

Other Points on Friendship:

- If discussing their friendship, it is important to note their initial different reactions to the disaster and the bond they share.
- Simon may be considered cold in 'forgetting' Joe, but he needs to concentrate if he wants to get safely off the mountain. It is easy to condemn Simon, but we must trust Joe and his view of Simon at the end of the book and how Joe survived as did their friendship.

Spirit of Adventure:

- Joe explores what motivates people to go on adventures that others haven't before-wondering if it's pleasure or egotism that pushes him on?
- The drive to try new things seems to be a significant part of this. Simon experiences hallucinations due to sleeping tablets and Joe wants to experience the same. Joe seems intent on experiencing life in a way most of us would find frightening.
- The danger is part of the spirit of adventure. When reaching the summit Joe describes it as an anti-climax and concludes the only end to this adventure will be his own death as he tries something beyond his ability.

Other Points on the Spirit of Adventure:

- The sense of adventure is closely linked to the characters of Joe and Simon. You should note the changing emotions of the climbers depending on the situation they find themselves in the novel.
- (i) They are exhilarated at the beginning at the thought of what they are going to do (ii) They explain their reactions to their three failed attempts and go on (iii) They become downbeat when they reach the summit (iv) They even begin to question what they are doing when disaster strikes
- We need to consider if this event has changed the characters completely or whether the anecdotes included by Joe show us that they are likely to climb again.

Survival:

- Both men have to do extraordinary things in order to survive events in the novel.
- The story is an inspirational tale of what it takes to overcome massive obstacles and challenges. The ordinary reader would most likely have given up and died at the first hint of pain and suffering.
- For Simon the act of survival is based on his decision to cut the rope. Joe would probably have died if Simon had not been so decisive in his action in cutting the rope.
- For Joe, survival was a process of overcoming physical and psychological barriers. He develops a rhythm of sorts for each part of the journey off the mountain which helps him getting down.
- The fear of the unknown and the opposing urges in his mind that debate between giving up and driving on.

Nature:

- The contrasting beauty and cruelty of the mountain is an important **theme** in the book. There is a **superficial irony** that aspects of the mountain that drew Joe and Simon to the challenge in the first place prove almost insurmountable to Joe on his way down.
- Note Joe's struggle through the moraines, initially an intriguing puzzle and eventually become a dangerous maze.
- Religious imagery is used to describe the mountain-both evil and sacred (P119 and 137)
- Both Joe and Simon feel as if there is a sense of 'otherness', something spiritual about the mountain.
- At other times the mountain is seen as an inanimate object. Simon even describes what they attempted as stupid.
- Chapter 11-A Land Without Pity sums up the reality of the situation. This is an extreme environment and the challenge comes from the difficulty in overcoming it.

REVISION CHECK:

Key Contexts and Themes:

1. Why does Joe believe he can climb with Simon?
2. What happens to Simon at the summit?
3. What does Joe notice when he wakes up the natural snow hole?
4. Why can't Simon leave Joe straight after the accident when he has broken his leg?
5. How does Joe get through the boulders?
6. What does Joe suggest is the point of climbing the mountain? **Begin with:** Joe talks a lot about why he climbs the mountain and when he reaches the summit, he claims...
7. What does Joe suggest it takes to be courageous? **Begin with:** When on the ice bridge Joe points out that...

8. Reread the following pages and discuss what they reveal about friendship:
 - An unspoken understanding that they would stop the test climb. P10
 - The trust needed to climb. P34
 - Simon finds Joe at the bottom of the ice cliff. P69
 - Joe thanking Simon. P201
9. Reread the following pages and discuss what they tell you about the spirit of adventure:
 - Enjoying the sense of danger. P19
 - The anecdote about falling when sleeping. P27
 - Reaching the summit. P44
 - Simon describing the challenge as a stupid thing to undertake. P118
10. Reread the following pages and discuss what they tell you about survival:
 - Simon lowering Joe down the mountain. P76-80
 - Cutting the rope. P101
 - Joe crawling down the glacier. P146
11. Reread the following pages and discuss what they tell you about nature:
 - Simon feeling nothing for the beauty of the mountain. P118
 - The beauty of the crevasse. P134
 - The malevolent landscape and conditions. P152
 - The menacing fissures. P161