

Touching the Void-Plot and Action Summary

When does the action take place?

The action takes place in 1985. Joe's survival and his recollection of events have made *Touching the Void* one of the most remarkable pieces of literary non-fiction.

Where does the action take place?

The action takes place in the Peruvian Andes-remote, unfamiliar and often unconquered mountain territory even for the most experienced mountaineer.

Chapter One-Beneath the Mountain Lakes:

Summary:

- The setting in the Peruvian Andes is described by Joe.
- Richard is introduced and how he came to be on the trip.
- Simon-Joe's climbing partner is introduced and they discuss the weather.
- Simon and Joe attempt an acclimatisation climb-but fail.
- Supplies are bought from the locals who live in huts below their based camp.
- They are 28 miles from the nearest village.
- Simon and Joe do another test climb-Joe falls and they stop.
- They make a third attempt at another summit and fail again.
- All three make their way to the bottom of the peak Siula Grande

Why is this chapter important?

- Introduces to us why Joe loves climbing and the knowledge it requires.
- Introduces the main characters.
- Establishes the relationship between Joe and Simon.
- It hints at the dangers the pair will face.

Other points to note:

- We gather the reasons why anyone would wish to climb-scenery, beauty, challenge, extreme sports, high risk, potential hazards, overcoming the problems or challenges the mountain presents, facing the elements (weather) and overcoming the odds.
- **Joe and Simon's relationship**: they share a close relationship; they have a common bond with regard to climbing.
- Trust is important in their relationship and a common approach to climbing.
- The three failed attempts, the poor weather conditions and Joe's comment that something was 'nagging' at him suggest to the reader that conditions for the expedition are already in doubt and signal trouble ahead.
- **Dramatic Irony**: when the reader knows more than the actual characters in the novel. This helps create **tension** regarding the potential disasters Joe has mentioned. Find examples of how these points are hinted at.

- **Ellipsis:** when words are left out by means of ... It causes the reader to reflect on the words that have been said. Find examples and discuss.
- **Key quote:** "There were few other people I could have coped with for so long."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Two-Tempting Fate:

Summary:

- Joe describes the beginning of the climb.
- He describes climbing and how much he enjoys it.
- Both see dangerous ice cornices (overhanging of snow) on the west face.
- There is a rock fall and both men are forced to climb in the dark.
- They find a snow hole to sleep in and Joe remembers a traumatic time when he fell whilst sleeping on another climb.

Why is this chapter important?

- It captures some of the rhythm of climbing.
- It introduces the theme of the thrill of adventure and danger.
- It uses motivational language.

Other points to note:

- Joe uses repetition to help establish the rhythm of their climbing.
- A variety of verbs are used to help establish the movement.
- The **present tense** is used in this chapter in order to make the actions seem immediate and more powerful.
- The rhythm of the writing changes when the climb becomes more difficult. Sentences are short and snappy; actions seem abrupt, rushed and uncertain.
- An important **theme** is that of why people choose to put themselves in danger because of extreme sports? There is discomfort, fear and hazards at all times. This however is part of the pleasure in the challenge.
- The emotion of being on the mountain, isolated with the sense of danger that both men enjoy-makes them feel alive. Find quotes in the chapter to support this.
- Exclamation marks and repetition are used to help convey Joe's feelings on climbing. These techniques in his writing help to add to the thrill, challenge and adventure that he feels about this climb.
- **Key quote:** "I set off hurriedly...I could see it was steep, 80', maybe, and hammered in a screw when I reached its base."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Three-Storm at the Summit:

Summary:

- Joe and Simon meet a barrier of seracs (clumps of ice that form ridges on a glacier).
- Simon falls and Joes injures his mouth.

- Joe admits to his fear when the climbing becomes difficult.
- They bivouac (temporary camp) overnight when it is clear they won't make the summit.
- They both struggle up the flutings (channels in mountains-look like corrugated iron).
- They reach the summit-described by Joe as an anti-climax.
- At the start of the descent there is a snow storm and Simon falls.

Why is this chapter important?

- Shows both men in moments of difficulty.
- It explores the ideas of dreams and ambitions.
- The use of technical terms emphasises the writer's expertise and knowledge.

Other points to note:

- Focus here on the characters and their relationship.
- Joe at the start is presented as thoughtful-keeps a diary and considers the negative effects of weather. But in this chapter fear grips him and he makes careless mistakes with ice.
- Simon is seen at the start as easy going and always smiling, but in this chapter he is abrupt and pessimistic. Note his repetition of "I noticed" when Joe tries to apologise for his actions.
- The importance of trust is established in the opening chapter, but it is clearly shown in the troubled situation shown in this chapter. The **ROPE** is presented as a **SYMBOL** of trust in the novel.
- Their dream of being the first to reach the summit by the west face is achieved, but Joe described it as an anti-climax. The language he uses is flat-not the words of someone who has just achieved an ambition. Find examples.
- Joe explores the underlying reasons why people take on these challenges. Is it for a sense of achievement or to boost ones own ego? The main point is, once you achieve something difficult you must continued to strive for more dangerous things if you want to maintain a sense of purpose.
- **Technical Climbing Terms:** in this chapter Joe does not explain the technical climbing terms as he did before in the earlier chapters. This is done so as to persuade the reader of his expertise and skill as well as drawing us into the experience of climbing. Find quotes that support this.
- **Key quote:** "If you succeed with one dream...it's not long before you're conjuring up another, slightly harder, a bit more ambitious-a bit more dangerous."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Four-On the Edge:

Summary:

- Joe and Simon continue to walk along the damaged ridge. Simon keeps descending, not noticing easier ground.

- Joe crashes into Simon and they share an angry exchange-they are tired and stressed out about their predicament.
- They climb in the dark before digging a snow hole.
- Simon recalls a tragic personal story/**anecdote** about some Japanese climbers-told to us by Joe.
- They wake the next morning with only enough food supplies for one more meal.
- Joe falls again and fears toppling over a cliff edge onto the west face.

Why is this chapter important?

- It shows the relationship of the climbers when under strain.
- It includes an anecdote about the Japanese climbers to add to the increasing dangers that they face.
- It uses language to help build the tension.

Other points to note:

- There are a lot of clues in this chapter relating to how the climb is destined to go wrong.
- In earlier chapters, they took their time and examined the mountain before making their choices. Here they are making rash and flawed choices.
- As their climbing technique breaks down, their relationship strains.
- Joe notes their intimacy in the snow hole as odd, hinting that there is a slight distance between them because of the strain of their descent.
- **Anecdotes:** are used throughout the book to help explain the important features of climbing and incidents each climber has experienced in the past. These stories are dramatic and highlight the dangers that Joe and Simon face as well as adding to the tension.
- The Japanese anecdote was witnessed by Simon, but told to the reader by Joe. This creates a **distance** with the reader on the full impact of such an incident. The use of **narrative perspective** keeps us interested as we can only guess why Simon would continue to climb having witnessed such a terrible ordeal.
- This chapter builds tension-we are waiting for a catastrophe to happen. Joe adds to the tension through his choice of verbs as well as short and abrupt sentences. Find examples of these in this chapter.
- **Key quote:** "Then, just as suddenly, I stopped, with my whole body pressed into the snow, head buried in it, with my arms and legs spreadeagled in a desperate position. I dared not move.
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Five-Disaster:

Summary:

- Joe walks across the cornice, describing the ice cliff and whether to descend or go a long way round with limited supplies.
- Joe climbs down the ice cliff and falls.
- He breaks his leg and discusses Simon's possible reactions to it.
- Simon describes his reaction to the accident and how he checks Joe, even though he believes Joe will die.

- Simon then tells us that he cannot leave Joe while Joe is still fighting to survive.
- Joe describes how he tries to carry on climbing.
- Simon begins lowering him down the mountain.

Why is this chapter important?

- It examines the **themes** of fear and hope.
- It describes the relationship between the climbers in a dangerous position.
- It splits into two different **narrative perspectives** for the first time.

Other points to note:

- Joe's reactions to his fall change many times during this chapter.
- All at once he tells us he is not afraid of dying and yet his natural instinct is to fight for survival.
- Simon witnesses Joe's "private struggle" and realises he must help Joe as Joe wants to survive.
- There is a mixture of fear and hope within Joe. Death seems to be the only option initially, but when Simon sees the col (low gap between two mountains) Joe sees this as hope and wants to survive.
- The shift in narrative allows us to see the changing relationship between Joe and Simon.
- Joe notes Simon's look of pity when he sees him injured.
- Simon seems to distance himself from Joe as a means of surviving the shock of what has happened and what could happen Joe (death).
- Joe sees that Simon could get off the mountain alone without Joe and is scared to ask for his help. Joe's survival is reliant on Simon.
- Once Simon begins to lower Joe down the mountain, some of their old relationship from the beginning of the book returns.
- The change in the **narrative perspective** allows us to hear Simon's side of the story, but could also **symbolise** a break in their partnership, as their stories are no longer the same. It suggests that Simon will soon separate from Joe. The **dramatic irony** here is that we know it will happen and at this point we know more than either character.
- The different narrative perspectives add to the intensity of the emotion we feel for each as we empathise with each character independently.
- **Key quotes:** "...a fierce burning fire coming down the inside of my thigh, seeming to ball in my groin, building and building until I cried out at it, and my breathing came in ragged gasps."
- Joe, "...was trying to help himself by contouring round the small rise in front of him."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Six-The Final Choice:

Summary:

- Joe feels that Simon is lowering him down too quickly.
- He describes his pain, the effort digging the belay seats and the effects of the cold.
- Simon shows great tenderness towards Joe.

- Joe falls over a cliff edge and believes he will die from the cold.
- Simon describes how he makes the choice to cut the rope and considers his reaction to the decision.

Why is this chapter important?

- It explores Joe's state of mind.
- It provides us with Simon's justification for his actions.
- It contains religious references.

Other points to note:

- Joe focuses on his pain in this chapter. He uses **emotive language** and **verbs** to help capture the pain he endures. Find quotes.
- Most of what he has to endure is because of the cold. When dangling over the cliff edge, he **personifies** the temperature, giving it human qualities. "I thought of it as something living."
- His mind is disjointed and fragmented as he dangles over the edge, waiting for what will happen next-he and Simon are both going to fall to their deaths as he believes Simon will not be able to support his weight for much longer.
- He uses incomplete sentences and **ellipsis** to convey this. Find quotes.
- Simon's decision to cut the rope is explored. He knows Joe will die but he is decisive in his decision.
- Over time Simon's reaction to his decision becomes confused from feeling no guilt to feeling it necessary to prosecute himself.
- Ultimately Simon believes that he was right to cut the rope or else he would have died also. He is confused and the repetition of 'thinking' and 'did right' show that he is tormenting himself. Find quotes.
- The religious references at the end of the chapter by Simon, suggest that he may believe that he should be judged by some higher presence or being other than the reader. It may also suggest that he feels even more guilt than he is willing to admit in relation to cutting the rope.
- **Key quotes:** "As he spoke he reached out and caught hold of my waist, tugging me gently towards him. He was careful, almost tender in the way he spun me round..."
- "Had I killed him?-I didn't answer the thought, though some urging in the back of my mind told me that I had."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Seven-Shadows in the Ice:

Summary:

- Joe hangs from the rope waiting to fall. After the rope is cut he falls fast, expecting to die.
- He realises when he is in so much pain that he is still alive.
- He cannot move because he has landed on an ice bridge so he fixes a screw to the wall.
- He is both manic and rational at the same time.
- He decides he must abseil off the bridge or die.

Why is this chapter important?

- It explores thought processes in times of crisis.
- Contains powerful description of the crevasse.
- It has a **cliffhanger** at the end.

Other points to note:

- This chapter captures the random thoughts going through Joe's head as he is in a state of shock.
- His thoughts become slow and lazy. The repetition of the word **idle** and the simple sentences used convey his state of mind.
- Before falling, Joe is in a dreamlike state and looks at the stars like gemstones. This is a sharp contrast to the description he provides us with when he falls. **Alliteration** of harsh 'b' sound ensures a harsh change in tone.
- The crevasse is described in dark and oppressive words. It is as if there is something out there in the crevasse that could harm Joe. His laughter in the dark is described as 'inhuman'. The crevasse is described in hellish terms. Find quotes.
- **Cliffhanger:** this chapter ends dramatically with Joe lowering himself down the crevasse not knowing if he is going to reach the bottom. The following chapter is narrated by Simon. The gap in narration by Joe adds to the tension of the novel for the reader as we are left waiting to find out what happens.
- **Key quote:** "The noises that returned from the darkness were distorted and inhuman, cackling echoes rolling up and around."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Eight-Silent Witness:

Summary:

- Simon describes his descent and finds the place where Joe fell over the edge.
- He describes the ice cliff and abseiling down it. He sees the crevasse that Joe has fallen into.
- He explores the act of cutting the rope and the point of climbing the mountain.
- Simon makes it to the glacier and across the moraines. He decides he must tell the truth about what happened as both he and Joe had achieved so much in spite of the final outcome.

Why is this chapter important?

- It allows Simon to explore the act of cutting the rope.
- Simon's account seems to mirror Joe's experience.
- It focuses on the point of taking on challenges.

Other points to note:

- It is important to note Simon's guilt at having survived and the problems he faces having cut the rope.

- The rope has been used as a **symbol of relationship and trust**. By cutting the rope, Simon has damaged this symbol for the whole climbing community.
- Although Simon would have died if he did not cut the rope, he may be accused of killing Joe. Simon points out in this situation, he could never win.
- Simon battles with his conscience and his confused thought processes. Find quotes to convey this.
- Chapters 7 and 8 work together in the book-two different narrative perspectives as their journeys have taken such different paths.
- Many of Joe's thoughts in chapter 7 are mirrored by Simon in chapter 8. The sense of something menacing, oppressive and evil.
- Their emotional reaction is also mirrored. They are still bound by a common attitude. Both men are tormented, both have rational moments and both focus on the futility (lack of purpose) in taking on such a challenge and yet battle to survive.
- The idea of **why** someone would take on such a **challenge** is an important **theme**. Joe touches on dreams and ambitions when he reaches the summit and yet describes it as an anti-climax.
- Simon feels that it is a "...silly thing to pit oneself against..." The excitement and expertise mean nothing when compared to what Simon is now going through regarding Joe.
- Yet it is the potential for death and danger that heightens the sense of challenge, e.g., Japanese climbers and Joe falling whilst sleeping.
- **Key quote:** "No one cuts the rope It could never have been that bad!"
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Nine-In the Far Distance:

Summary:

- Joe lowers himself further into the crevasse.
- He reaches a thin floor of snow that should allow him to cross the crevasse and find his way out.
- He fights the pain and finds a climbing pattern. He makes his way out of the crevasse and back onto the side of the mountain.
- He realises that he has six miles to go and will most likely die on the way.
- Joe describes how he has two minds, and he chooses to listen to the commanding voice that tells him what to do.
- He sees the cut rope and realises that Simon must think he is dead.

Why is this chapter important?

- It explores the ideas of courage and fear.
- It captures the beauty and evil of the mountain.
- It contains images of good and evil.

Other points to note:

- This chapter highlights Joe's bravery in lowering himself into a hole of darkness. He is determined and committed to this act of bravery and survival.

- Joe questions himself throughout-he does not have the courage for suicide and is not brave enough to look into the hole. He is convinced that the desperation in not wanting a long drawn out death forces him into action.
- Fear and courage are in conflict here. On one hand he cannot look into the hole and then eventually cannot help himself. The torment of being afraid changes his perception of what is courageous.
- The beauty of the mountains contrast the horror of the situation he finds himself in. It is a place of extremes.
- These extremes are matched by Joe's emotional reactions to the situation. The chapter is characterised by deep despair and determination and elation through the use of **emotive words**. Find quotes.
- Joe senses an evil, malevolent force around him which contrasts his description of the chamber he was in previously. He feels there is a larger force at work and his confusion wonders if it is good or evil.
- His feeling of powerlessness makes him believe that he is being controlled by something bigger than him.
- **Key quotes:** "I had to see what was beneath me because, for all my convictions, I didn't have the courage to do it blind."
- "...its magnificent vaulted crystal ceiling, its gleaming walls encrusted with a myriad fallen stones, shadows facing into darkness beyond the great gateway formed by the ice bridge..."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Ten-Mind Games:

Summary:

- Joe slides down the slope of the glacier, finds Simon's tracks and follows them across the glacier.
- He describes being pushed on by the voice to dig a snow hole. He is afraid to fall asleep.
- Simon now narrates-he has returned to camp and is recuperating.
- He considers whether he murdered Joe, then burns Joe's clothes.
- Simon and Richard talk of the future.

Why is this chapter important?

- It emphasises Joe's need to return to camp before Simon leaves.
- It refers to aspects of Joe's personal life that allow us to care for his survival.
- It uses different voices/narrative perspectives to plot the narrative.

Other points to note:

- **Split narrative perspective**-the first part of the chapter recounts Joe's struggle to get off the mountain. The second half recounts Simon's recuperation at base camp. This is known as a **narrative hook** (intrigues the reader).
- Joe keeps referring to his slow progress and we realise more time is passing.

- Simon and Richard burn Joe's possessions as if he no longer exists and this makes the reader feel a sense of dread and powerlessness.
- Using personal details on Joe's life back home allow us to get to know the man rather than the climber. He becomes more human and we empathise with him. He is shown to be cultured and well travelled, but the references to his mother are most poignant. We sense the potential loss of Joe for his whole family.
- Providing us with personal details of Joe, sustain our interest.
- **Key quote:** "They reminded me of pictures I had seen of carvings inside a Hindu temple...like the paintings by Titian of grossly fat nudes..."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Two-Tempting Fate:

Summary:

- Joe recounts a Shakespearean soliloquy he remembers in a nightmare. He worries about the lack of food and water.
- He crawls towards the moraines and gets lost amongst the boulders.
- He begins to suffer from snow blindness.
- He splints his leg and hops through the moraines.
- He descends the cliff and is off the mountain.
- Joe attempts to carry on to 'Bomb Alley' but has to give up and sleep.

Why is this chapter important?

- The soliloquy is important in revealing attitudes to death.
- It describes inhospitable images of the landscape.
- It has an abrupt ending.

Other points to note:

- The soliloquy allows Joe to explore the **theme of death**.
- It comes from *Measure for Measure*, where Claudio is sentenced to death for impregnating a woman out of wedlock. Joe faces death as he sought pleasure in doing something he knew to be dangerous.
- He fears death in the same way he fears the darkness as it represents the unknown.
- The terrain is difficult. Joe's descriptions highlight the haphazard and extreme nature of the landscape. He is at war with his surroundings.
- **Key quote:** "Which way, which way? Over there...and there I would crawl only to find myself dead-ended by another menacing fissure."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Twelve-Time Running Out:

Summary:

- Simon tells us how Richard wants to leave base camp. Simon is reluctant but agrees to do so the next day.
- They search for money he and Joe hid before their ascent.
- Simon notes how sad the local girls are at Joe's death and yet want payment.
- Joe tells us his motivational voice has become negative and defeatist.

- Joe realises that Simon may soon leave and keeps going despite falling over constantly.
- He finds water and manages to keep going when he senses he is close to camp.
- He calls out for Simon.

Why is this chapter important?

- Narrative perspective is used to create dramatic irony.
- Richard is used as a plot device to add to tension of he and Simon possibly leaving before Joe makes it to camp.
- Short sentences are used to build tension.

Other points to note:

- Joe's proximity to the camp and Simon's plan to leave soon add to the tension of this chapter.
- Simon and Richard dismiss Joe's shouting as dogs whining. Dramatic irony-adds to our hope and frustration.
- Simon searches for Joe's money-we may feel this is wrong-as if he is stealing from Joe, even though we know Simon is convinced Joe is dead.
- Richard is used as a plot device in pressing Simon to leave camp.
- If Simon had chosen to leave we would interpret him as being cold and running away from what he had done. Richard's insistence to leave and Simon's reluctance allow us to feel sympathy for Simon.
- This chapter leads to the **climax** of the novel. Joe's use of language helps convey this. His short sentences convey his actions and add to the pace. The incomplete final sentence acts to build suspense as to whether Joe will survive or not.
- **Key quote:** "Nine o'clock, eleven o'clock, the night stretched on, and the five hours' crawling from the moraine dam meant nothing."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

Chapter Thirteen-Tears in the Night:

Summary:

- Simon finds Joe close to camp and near to death.
- Joe thanks Simon and tells him he did the right thing.
- They share a moment of close friendship. Simon inspects Joe's leg.
- Simon and Joe have a conversation about Simon's decision to cut the rope.
- Simon, Joe and Richard leave the camp and go down the mountain.
- They hire a truck and take Joe and another man to a hospital in Lima.
- Joe is taken for an operation.

Why is this chapter important?

- It contains a message from Joe about his opinion of Simon's actions.
- It shows the strain placed on Joe's and Simon's relationship is not permanent.
- It contains a direct comparison between Joe and another injured man.

Other points to note:

- One of the reasons Joe wrote this book was to clear Simon of any sense of guilt in cutting the rope. In many respects the audience for the final chapter of the book is the climbing community who would have found the cutting of the rope such a terrible act.
- Joe thanks Simon for cutting the rope for in doing so, he saved his life. By repeating the message Joe is making it clear to us that he is grateful and not angry.
- Joe shows his sympathy for Simon in terms of what he had endured, thinking he had killed Joe. We have no choice but to feel empathy and not condemnation for Simon.
- An important theme in the book is their relationship. From the start they have a close bond. Even when the narratives split, there is a common response to the situation each of them find themselves in and still makes them seem close.
- Simon is stern and efficient in caring for Joe and their relationship is as it was at the start of the novel, whereby they now have another problem they must overcome.
- Joe focuses on the closeness of their friendship. The experience seems to have strengthened their friendship rather than damage the trust they share.
- The man who shares the truck with Joe, highlights the poverty in the area. Joe's story is dramatic in terms of survival, but the old man is unlikely to survive his ordeal as he is taken to a place where he is more likely to die as a result of his injuries.
- **Key quote:** Joe on Simon: "How much he had been through I could only guess at."
- Use your class notes and novel to find other key quotes in this chapter.

REVISION CHECK:

Plot and Action:

1. What are Joe and Simon attempting to climb?
2. Why does Joe fall?
3. What does Simon choose to do that will upset many climbers?
4. How does Joe escape the crevasse?
5. What does Joe say to Simon in the tent at the end of the book?
6. What is the impact of knowing that Joe Simpson survives the events of the book? **Begin with:** As a reader we have more knowledge than usual, so...
7. How are multiple narrative perspectives used in the book? **Begin with:** Giving Simon a chance to tell his story means...
8. On P212 in the section called 'Ten Years on...' Joe quotes a passage written by Simon. What does this passage tell us about the theme of trust and the importance of the symbolism of the rope?