

From The Explorer's Daughter

As a small child, Kari Herbert lived, with her family, among the Inughuit people (sometimes called Eskimos) in the harsh environment of the Arctic. In 2002 she revisited the area, staying near Thule, a remote settlement in the snowy wastes of north Greenland. In this passage she writes about her experience of watching a hunt for the narwhal, a toothed whale, and what she thought and felt about it.

Two hours after the last of the hunters had returned and eaten, narwhal were spotted again, this time very close. Within an hour even those of us on shore could with the naked eye see the plumes of spray from the narwhal catching the light in a spectral play of colour. Two large pods* of narwhal circled in the fjord*, often looking as if they were going to merge, but always slowly, methodically passing each other by. Scrambling back up to the lookout I looked across the glittering kingdom in front of me and took a sharp intake of breath. The hunters were dotted all around the fjord. The evening light was turning butter-gold, glinting off man and whale and catching the soft billows of smoke from a lone hunter's pipe. From where we sat at the lookout it looked as though the hunters were close enough to touch the narwhal with their bare hands and yet they never moved. Distances are always deceptive in the Arctic, and I fell to wondering if the narwhal existed at all or were instead mischievous tricks of the shifting light. ...

The narwhal rarely stray from High Arctic waters, escaping only to the slightly more temperate waters towards the Arctic Circle in the dead of winter, but never entering the warmer southern seas. In summer the hunters of Thule are fortunate to witness the annual return of the narwhal to the Inglefield Fjord, on the side of which we now sat.

The narwhal ... is an essential contributor to the survival of the hunters in the High Arctic. The mattak or blubber* of the whale is rich in necessary minerals and vitamins, and in a place where the climate prohibits the growth of vegetables or fruit, this rich source of vitamin C was the one reason that the Eskimos have never suffered from scurvy*. ... For centuries the blubber of the whales was also the only source of light and heat, and the dark rich meat is still a valuable part of the diet for both man and dogs (a single narwhal can feed a team of dogs for an entire month). Its single ivory tusk, which can grow up to six feet in length, was used for harpoon tips and handles for other hunting implements (although the ivory was found to be brittle and not hugely satisfactory as a weapon), for carving protective tupilaks*, and even as a central beam for their small ancient dwellings. Strangely, the tusk seems to have little use for the narwhal itself; they do not use the tusk to break through ice as a breathing hole, nor will they use it to catch or attack prey, but rather the primary use seems to be to disturb the top of the sea bed in order to catch Arctic halibut for which they have a particular predilection*. Often the ends of their tusks are worn down or even broken from such usage.

Comment [RK1]: Waiting for something significant

Comment [RK2]: Definitive - serious, significant

Comment [RK3]: Tranquil and beautiful. Emphasised by "ly" words -> lulling sounds

Comment [RK4]: Suggests excitement present, continuous tense - going on now, active, contrast with slow movement of narwhal

Comment [RK5]: Crystalline scene creates vivid imagery - fantasy and magical

Comment [RK6]: Small and insignificant. Hunters seem braver - heroic struggle against narwhals

Comment [RK7]: Soft warm and gentle

Comment [RK8]: Sibilance makes it seem soft, slow and gentle

Comment [RK9]: Quantitative vs qualitative - here the quantitative measurements that we are used to in our lives (e.g. of distance) seem to break down and become unreliable and we are left with the qualitative 'feel' of an event rather than measurable details about it. This may have been done to show how the Arctic is a unique place where the rules that hold in the rest of the world don't really apply ... and this in turn may reflect the moral dilemma the author faces at the end. While in the West we generally feel it is barbaric to hunt beautiful animals like whales or seals, these rules don't seem to apply so easily when you are actually in the Arctic.

Comment [RK10]: Sounds informative + factual - this is created by foregrounding the subject (the narwhal) rather than the thoughts or feelings of the author, which is what happens in the rest of the piece. This change of focus reflects how this autobiography is fulfilling two roles - informing us about the narwhal and life in the Arctic while also revealing the author's responses to the events she witnessed there

Comment [RK11]: Jargon - technical terms reinforce the sense that this paragraph is primarily informative

Comment [RK12]: However, the final sentence shifts the focus once again to the personal reflections of the author

Comment [RK13]: Whale hunting is absolutely necessary in the Arctic - once we realise this it creates tension as we know how important this hunt is

Comment [RK14]: The range of uses that the narwhal is put to shows how vital it is to the lives of the Inughuit

The women clustered on the knoll of the lookout, binoculars pointing in every direction, each woman focusing on her husband or family member, occasionally spinning round at a small gasp or jump as one of the women saw a hunter near a narwhal. ... Each wife knew her husband instinctively and watched their progress intently; it was crucial to her that her husband catch a narwhal — it was part of their staple diet, and some of the mattak and meat could be sold to other hunters who hadn't been so lucky, bringing in some much-needed extra income. Every hunter was on the water. It was like watching a vast, waterborne game with the hunters spread like a net around the sound

Comment [RK15]: All movement is monitored, just waiting for something to happen – revealing the importance of the event and creating tension

Comment [RK16]: Intently focused on men – climatic

Comment [RK17]: Importance towards their survival

Comment [RK18]: Vital, important, everyone involved

Comment [RK19]: Anticipation that creates suspense and perhaps also sympathy for narwhal as it seems to have wandered into a trap

Comment [RK20]: Another informative paragraph – this breaks the tension so that it can be more effectively reintroduced in the next paragraph and this also gives the reader an opportunity to wonder about the outcome of the hunt

The narwhal ... are intelligent creatures, their senses are keen and they talk to one another under the water. Their hearing is particularly developed and they can hear the sound of a paddling kayak from a great distance. That ... was why the hunters had to sit so very still in the water.

Comment [RK21]: One hunter reflects his insignificance and suggests his heroism

Comment [RK22]: Informal word makes the article accessible to the readers

Comment [RK23]: The tension is captivating – it has drawn in the author and perhaps the reader too

Comment [RK24]: Repetition of 'so' reinforces the sense that the hunters are attempting to carry out a heroic task where the odds are stacked against them

One hunter was almost on top of a pair of narwhal, and they were huge. He gently picked up his harpoon and aimed - in that split second my heart leapt for both hunter and narwhal. I urged the man on in my head; he was so close, and so brave to attempt what he was about to do - he was miles from land in a flimsy kayak, and could easily be capsized and drowned. The hunter had no rifle, only one harpoon with two heads and one bladder. It was a foolhardy exercise and one that could only inspire respect. And yet at the same time my heart also urged the narwhal to dive, to leave, to survive.

Comment [RK25]: The end of the sentence here emphasises the deadly finality that would presumably follow capsizing like this

Comment [RK26]: This moral dilemma hasn't really been answered throughout the passage and Herbert doesn't answer it at all. Allows the readers to decide their point of view

Comment [RK27]: Herbert asks what the readers are asking in their minds already, emphasizing that she understands what people against hunting think

Comment [RK28]: Intense imagery amplifies the stereotype readers already have in their mind.

Comment [RK29]: However, in contrast to the vicious image of seal battering, the Inughuits are given a sense of justification due to them being humane and the killing being so vital for their survival.

This dilemma stayed with me the whole time that I was in Greenland. I understand the harshness of life in the Arctic and the needs of the hunters and their families to hunt and live on animals and sea mammals that we demand to be protected because of their beauty. And I know that one cannot afford to be sentimental in the Arctic. 'How can you possibly eat seal?' I have been asked over and over again. True, the images that bombarded us several years ago of men battering seals for their fur hasn't helped the issue of polar hunting, but the Inughuit do not kill seals using this method, nor do they kill for sport. They use every part of the animals they kill, and most of the food in Thule is still brought in by the huntergatherers and fishermen. Imported goods can only ever account for part of the food supply; there is still only one annual supply ship that makes it through the ice to Qaanaaq, and the small twice-weekly plane from West Greenland can only carry a certain amount of goods. Hunting is still an absolute necessity in Thule.

Comment [RK30]: There is a conviction here which suggests that the author understands the hunt is necessary ... but her reticence to really commend the hunt (it is a necessity rather than a positive good) and the sense that she is experiencing a dilemma implies that the author wishes there was a better way for the Inughuit to survive

Key

Sense of beauty

Excitement of the hunt

Interdependence between man and narwhal

Informative

Tension

Heroism

Sympathy for Narwhal

Dilemma