Alnilam Short Guide

Alnilam by James Dickey

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Contents

Characters

Asurrogate for the inquisitive reader, cantankerous, misanthropic Frank Cahill is the device by which Dickey provides entry into the Army Air Corps training base in Peckover.

Cahill's quest for the truth about his dead son provides the pretext for introducing each of the other characters, as well as for meditations on life, death, and love. Cahill is also important for providing an outsider's perspective, that of a blind old civilian among mostly young recruits, thereby emphasizing the theme of the elusiveness of truth.

The most important character in Alnilam, Joel Cahill, never appears in the novel. Dead before the novel begins, he is the absent text that every one of the other characters — and the reader — must attempt to decode. Joel is the figure linking everyone else and the touchstone for gauging their personalities.

Joel came among the group of rebellious cadets with a few strange ideas gleaned from two nineteenth century poems — James Thomson's "The City of Dreadful Night" and Shelley's Prometheus Unbound — and from science fiction. The force of his personality had been enough to involve several cadets in rituals and secret messages, the aim of which was to mold an elite corps of pilots who would be beyond the Army's control.

An excellent pilot, he swooped over a brush fire, was sucked to earth by a downdraft, was rescued in bad shape by a farmer, then escaped the farmer to flee first back to the fire and then into a nearby river, where he finally disappeared: a symbolic progression of air, earth, fire, water. His body was never found, and the corps of loyal cadets believe that Joel is not really dead but out there somewhere directing their actions.

Because of Joel, Frank Cahill meets Hannah Pelham and reenacts his son's romantic relationship. In search of reliable information about his son's fate, the elder Cahill confronts the inept and pompous base commandant, Colonel Hoccleve, and the tyrannical task master Lieutenant Foy. McClintock McCaig, a civilian flight instructor, befriends Cahill and assists him in ferreting out the truth about Joel's death, and life. Part of that truth is the cult that grew up around the magnetic young pilot whose fatal crash, which came as he defied regulations by flying over a forest fire, seems connected to his belief in astral projection, an ability to fly without mechanical assistance.

Among the members of the cult named "Alnilam," Stathis Harbelis remains one of the most devoted.

Social Concerns

Dickey drew upon his own experience as a combat pilot in World War II and on three decades of brooding to produce Alnilam, a large, ambitious work. "You can't stop a man from talking, once he's been in a war," says Captain Whitehall, a fictional navigator who might be commenting on the capacious book in which he appears.

Frank Cahill, a middle-aged carpenter who has built himself a small amusement park in Atlanta, has recently gone blind from a sudden attack of diabetes. When he receives a telegram informing him that his son Joel has been killed in an Air Corps training accident, Cahill takes Zack, a ferocious companion who seems more wolf than dog, and boards a bus for Peckover, North Carolina. It is January 1943, and Cahill and the reader spend several days at the Army Air Corps training camp attempting to understand what has happened to the son, who grew up with his mother in Memphis and whom Cahill has never seen.

"Alnilam," the Arabic name for a string of pearls, is also the name of a star at the center of the Orion constellation, and it is a crucial element in the cult that has grown up around the charismatic Joel. The young pilot, who seems born to fly and has concocted a kind of aviational kabbalah, has attracted the fervent allegiance of cadets on several bases, and the animosity of his commanding officer, Colonel Hoccleve. The climax of the novel comes when the Alnilam devotees arrange a disruptive action at the graduation of their flight class.

But Dickey is no proponent of organized power, whether it is the military or a band of renegades, and he suggests that those who plot for ultimate power will ultimately fail because of the inevitable Judas among them and because they always go too far.

Techniques

Many of Alnilam's pages are split into two columns: the left, in dark print, representing Cahill's perception, and the right, in light print, representing the "objective reality" of the many people he meets. The use of physical blindness to portray psychological and philosophical insight draws on a long literary tradition that includes Oedipus, Tiresias, and Gloucester. The novel's dense, allusive prose forces the reader to undergo the same groping toward enlightenment as blind Cahill.

Each of Joel's instructors, fellow cadets, and female companions has a story to tell and a role in resolving the mystery of his life and death.

Alnilam abounds in flashbacks and digressions and in rich narrative sequences, such as the recounting of blind curmudgeon Cahill at the controls of an airborne plane or his encounter with Hannah Pelham, who transmits the gonorrhea she acquired from his son Joel. However, during almost seven hundred pages of ornate language and schematic symbolism, the reader's identification with Frank Cahill's befuddlement might extend to his admission that: "He was by now thoroughly tired of talk about flying, of having its special terms explained to him."

Themes

In Dickey's poem "Diabetes," the narrator goes blind because of his illness, and the poem develops some of the themes that Dickey would expand in Alnilam. He cannot find a justification for his own mortality: the loss of youthful powers is irreplaceable by wisdom of any nourishing vision of the remainder of life. There are no rituals or rites of passage for the mid-life adult male to undertake to redeem himself. He can only dread further loss of powers, or remember with poignance the range of his youthful passions. Other major concerns of his poetry are the living person's identification with the dead, mysticism, the world of animals, the divisions of light and darkness, and inner and outer reality.

Frank Cahill is this poetic persona on a quest to rediscover, not his own, but his son's youth, and through his affair with Hannah attempts regenerative restoration. But as in all of Dickey's work, the physical body must release itself to the natural world, free of gravity and through unification with earth's creatures and the heavenly bodies. Joel was pulled to Earth in flames, but instead of going to his death in a pyre, his restless spirit has been damned to roam among his compatriot cadets and beckon them to seek power. The conflict between rational authority (the military) and mystical nihilism (Joel's rebellious cult) establishes Alnilam's theme of bondage through social order and release through the individual's identification with the galaxy's order as controlling metaphor.

Adaptations

Deliverance (1970), which is filled with cinematic metaphors and tightly constructed around a plot of physical actions in a picturesque landscape, seemed almost destined for the successful movie treatment it received two years after publication. However, in its length, its use of typographical devices that depend on print, and its interior monologue of a blind diabetic, Alnilam seems almost deliberately uncinematic.

Nor did the failure of the book to become a popular success encourage producers to adapt it, and Alnilam has not, to date, been made into a film.

Key Questions

Alnilam is a challenging novel. Its experimental structure and presentation are likely to interest some readers but are as likely to put off others. Few discussions of the novel are likely to avoid evaluating the dark and light type columns, and they are an issue that might best be dealt with early on.

What purpose does the unusual presentation serve? How does it affect the process of reading the book? More interesting issues are the novel's presentation of metaphysical ideas, the creation of a cult, and the search of a father for the truth about his son. Does Frank Cahill search for the truth in a disciplined manner or a scattered way?

How does his search reflect his personality? Why does the father seem to reenact some of what his son did?

1. What is going on with the dark and light print in different columns on a page? How should one read the page? What comes first?

2. Is Alnilam too experimental for general audiences? Could you make an argument for why people should read the novel?

3. How has Joel become the center of a cult? How seriously do people take his ideas about astral projection?

4. Does the violence in the novel serve any purpose?

5. Frank Cahill's blindness seems to be a symbol central to the themes of Alnilam. What does it represent? Does it say something about his relationship to his son? Are there other kinds of blindness in the novel?

6. What are Cahill's motivations for investigating the death of a son he has never seen?

7. What does the novel reveal about flying? About life on an air base during World War II?

8. Was Joel a fool? What do we readers learn about him?

Related Titles

The peculiar physical design of Alnilam, its organization into columns of dark and light type, recalls Dickey's tendency in his early poetry to divide his lines into distinct halves. As in much of the rest of his writing, Dickey is attentive here to the accents and idioms of his characters, in this case for the most part the language of rural North Carolina. In Alnilam, he continues his connoisseurship of the monomaniacal individual tested under extraordinary circumstances. Violence is again an important feature of the Dickey universe, especially in the scenes in which Zack kills five ferocious canines, is himself decapitated by a airplane propeller, and Cahill crushes Lieutenant Foy's hand.

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