To the White Sea Short Guide

To the White Sea by James Dickey

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Contents

Characters

Take Hemingway's most macho man multiplied to the fifth power and you begin to see the hero of To the White Sea, a hunter and survivor whose world has no place for women. Then place him in psychological territory reminiscent of Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902), and you have tail-gunner Muldrow, shot down but not out over Tokyo, cutting a swath across Japan in his wartime adventures, part human, part wolverine, and part poet.

Muldrow is a loner, regarded by his Air Force colleagues with a mixture of awe and fear. He seems entirely detached from the events from the war, calmly going over the contents of his survival kit, shooting down planes with cool calculation, and measuring everything and everyone in terms of what he can "use."

Yet Muldrow also is exceptionally attuned to beauty, to grace, to small moments that others might not notice.

For instance, he is enamored of the cold and his ability to thrive in it. He describes in poetic terms what it feels like to run without snowshoes after a long winter of wearing them, reveling in the capabilities of his body. He treasures his tools, particularly his knife, with its flexible blade and the shine it produces in moonlight. When he spends several days at a waterfall he draws strength from the beauty of the setting, wishing he never had to leave.

These aspects of Muldrow's personality make him a complex character who defies labeling. He seems in some senses a killing machine, but Dickey presses the reader to move beyond a stereotypical conception of a warrior.

How can one person kill so efficiently and still remain a sympathetic character? That Dickey elicits empathy with this violent character is testament to his skill as a writer.

Other parts of Muldrow's character explore the boundaries between humans and animals. For example, he is obsessed with flying — not in a plane but as a bird. He can camouflage himself as well as any animal does. After doing what he can to ensure his safety, he sleeps easily and soundly, not burdened with the worry that most people would have in such a situation. This animal nature allows Muldrow to survive his experience.

By endowing Muldrow with a mixture of animal and human characteristics, Dickey has created a disturbing yet fascinating character. Muldrow embodies the best and worst of human behavior; he acts almost as a Rorschach blot upon which the reader can project internal values about violence and humankind's place in the natural world.

Social Concerns

In To the White Sea Dickey illuminates one man's metamorphosis into pure animal, operating on a survival level, killing instinctively, constantly searching for what he can use and discarding what he cannot. At the same time, this metamorphosis is marked by startling memories of color, speed, and cold; an elemental oneness with nature; and lyrical descriptions of the man's thoughts and actions as he makes his desperate journey. The novel operates on a primal level, bringing to life a character who pursues an essential quest, delivered in prose as tough and powerful as the man himself.

Muldrow, an American tail-gunner in World War II, is shot down during a bombing raid over Tokyo. Knowing he will be beheaded if captured, he decides to make his way north through Japan to the island of Hokkaido, where he hopes to find the cold and isolation reminiscent of his Alaskan boyhood.

War, with its simultaneous chaos, bonding, isolation, and terror, is one of the emotional foundations of the book.

Everything Muldrow does is set against the backdrop of war, and the novel itself is a meditation on the nature of war, a force as elemental as the glaciers Muldrow remembers from Alaska.

The violence that accompanies war, of course, constitutes a social concern.

Dickey's presentation of the firebombing of Tokyo is sure to be a catalyst for controversy. Equally disturbing, though, is Muldrow's enactment of violence. The massive violence of a bombing raid contrasts with Muldrow's one-man vendetta as he moves up north. Muldrow becomes a predator, killing without remorse to take what he needs, but he is not operating at an animal level. He imbues violence with thought: he kills for vengeance, he endows his victims with respect or dismissal, he ruminates on his tools for killing, and he gains energy from the lives he takes. Dickey's treatment of violence, therefore, illuminates not only its national manifestation (in war) but the more intimate violence which pervades modern society in the forms of murder, domestic violence, and serial killers.

Techniques

The first-person narrator allows the reader to empathize with a character she or he would probably fear in person. Muldrow is not a person easily approached, and his actions are extraordinary. The only way for a reader to appreciate Muldrow, rather than be simply terrorized by him, is to feel the workings of his mind, share his memories, and absorb his awareness of the natural world.

Another technique which adds to the richness of the novel stems from Dickey's skill as a poet. Passages of To the White Sea are lyrical. The prose is poetic in its imagery and energy, as in this example, one of many when Muldrow describes light: "The sun on top of water is one thing, but sun in it — down somewhere under the surface where it makes a kind of a box shape, you could say, a box that changes, that goes in and out like it's breathing — that's something else again, I'll tell you." Sometimes images jump out of the ordinary prose in which they are embedded, as when Muldrow is in a boat on his way to Hokkaido: "The water rocked me; I rocked the water."

The intensity of the prose matches perfectly the events in the novel. Dickey maintains a taut suspense and gives the reader a heightened awareness of detail.

Themes

A number of themes — war, violence, nature, sacrifice, and boundaries — are woven together in the overriding theme of the book, Muldrow's quest.

His trip from a sewer pipe in Tokyo to a blood-and-feathered last stand on Hokkaido constitutes not only the framework for the book but a major theme, as Muldrow, in a long tradition of heroes from Odysseus to Don Quixote, must overcome obstacles to achieve his goal. Muldrow's quest is unique because it is extraordinary; he does not just want to survive, he wants to travel through his enemy's heartland and gain his freedom.

Like other heroes, Muldrow is transformed by his quest. The war propels him to dire circumstances, violence both aggrieves and sustains him, and his own nature shifts as quickly as the terrain under his feet, as he moves from instinctive behavior to thoughtful reflection to nostalgia.

The theme of nature manifests itself in several ways in the novel. First there is nature in the physical world which surrounds Muldrow, in the air above Tokyo, the terraces for farming, the lakes and streams and ocean. This nature is something to be traversed, acknowledged, and used. Then there is the physical world which Muldrow remembers from his childhood, a place of magic, evoked in lyrical terms, as in this description of seeing an iceberg calve: When the ice slid off the near side of it, the brightest blue I ever saw in my life came right at us, it seemed like, so deep and pale it could have been some new kind of scientific thing, a new kind of light that nobody had ever seen before. The ice just slid down off it, and it was there, a thing, a new color just invented, but one that had also been waiting in the ice for a long time, a real long time, just for two guys in a kayak to see it.

Muldrow's awe of nature includes a respect for life that is seemingly at odds with his remorseless killing.

These opposing aspects of human nature are another theme of the book, as Dickey explores what it means to be human. Are we part of the animal world? Or apart from it? Muldrow, who reveres wild animals, particularly the wolverine, the marten, and the hawk, becomes a wild animal himself as he treks toward Hokkaido. His quest is to enter the natural world as fully as he can — to gather it into himself and to disappear into it. Many times, through killing, eating, or camouflaging himself, he achieves just that.

Yet he has human motivations and memories, as well as a sense of time and death, and these boundaries separate him from pure animal existence.

He has a notion of death as sacrifice.

He creates rituals peculiar to human beings. No matter how close he comes to transforming himself into a predator of the natural world, his human consciousness is

never erased, not even at the end when he is "in it, and part of it" with only his voice remaining.

Key Questions

To the White Sea is Dickey's third novel, following Deliverance and Alnilam. All three books revolve around male characters who are physically, emotionally, and mentally tested. To the White Sea is perhaps the most extreme of the three, with a single character thrust into desperate circumstances where he not only survives but seems to thrive. The novel is controversial, as much of Dickey's work has been over the course of his career, for its treatment of violence, war, and women. Below are some elements to consider when coming to your own appraisal of To the White Sea.

1. Does To the White Sea glorify violence? How is violence portrayed in various episodes in the book?

2. Compare perspectives on war (the Colonel in the opening, Major Sorbo, Muldrow, Japanese soldiers, the citizens of Tokyo). What overall view of war does Dickey offer?

3. Consider the main character. Is Muldrow a superhuman? A subhuman?

Are his actions realistic? What motivates his actions?

4. What effect is achieved by having Muldrow narrate the book? How does this perspective affect our interpretation of events? How would our understanding of events differ if the book were narrated by, say, a Tokyo resident, a Japanese farmer, or a news reporter from the United States?

5. Dickey's work has been much criticized for its treatment of women.

Discuss the female characters in the book (the old woman Muldrow beheads, the Japanese girl at the pool, the college girl in Alaska, the women in the village). How would you characterize those portrayals?

6. Nature is a pervasive force in To the White Sea. What view of nature does Dickey offer? Consider elements (fire, water, air, earth) as well as flora and fauna.

7. Images of flying, both natural and mechanical, are central to the book.

What do you make of Muldrow's obsession with flying? Is this preoccupation common to humankind?

8. Fire also is a recurrent element, as in the firebombing, Muldrow's flint, the fire of bullets, and the heat Muldrow feels as he dies. Why is fire emphasized? To what aspect of human nature does fire appeal?

9. Dickey has achieved more fame as a poet than as a novelist. Which passages in To the White Sea strike you as particularly poetic?

10. Given the success of Deliverance in its film version, would To the White Sea make a good film? What aspects of it would most appeal to the moviegoing public? What aspects of the novel would be in danger of being lost?

Literary Precedents

To the White Sea follows a long tradition of quest literature, beginning with Greek classics like the Iliad and Odyssey (c.1050-850 B.C.) and continuing to the present day in works as dissimilar as Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) or Margaret Atwood's Surfacing (1972). The quest motif is common and its basis is simple: The hero searches for something and must overcome obstacles to attain his or her goal.

In Muldrow's case, his quest is not only to survive (which would be the typical response of an ordinary person) but to march through enemy territory to a safe place. His quest is to find cold weather, which for him represents a benign environment and a return to his boyhood.

Cormac McCarthy's All The Pretty Horses (1992) offers an interesting juxtaposition to this novel. Both feature protagonists whose quests are fraught with violence.

Related Titles

Dickey's third novel shares some qualities of the first two. Like Deliverance (1970), To the White Sea describes a quest in an inhospitable landscape.

Like Alnilam (1987), the backdrop is the military. But the main connection between To the White Sea and Dickey's other work is to be found in his poetry.

In particular, "Firebombing," which shows the perspective of a World War II bomber, is easily linked with the novel. "Into the Stone" and "For the Last Wolverine" both connect to the animal theme of the book.

Dickey is still exploring themes which marked his early work: violence, death, and humankind's relationship to nature. Like Hemingway, Dickey creates male characters who are isolated and able to connect with others only in limited ways. Like Dostoevsky, Dickey probes the nature of violence and the psychology which allows it.

This novel, though, exemplifies a return to more accessible fiction. After the popular success of Deliverance, Alnilam was not well received. The title itself was indicative of the inaccessibility of the book, and readers were put off by the length of the novel. In To the White Sea Dickey returns to a shorter form, a tightly focused and controlled narrative, and a plot operating, literally and figuratively, at an elemental level.

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