

To the White Sea

By James Dickey



An essay by Garry Victor Hill

In James Dickey's *To the White Sea* (1993) the central character Sergeant Muldrow, an air force gunner stationed in Alaska in 1945, narrates. However, his personality by being so unemotional, is devoid of normal human traits and interest. Although we know much of his past, his thoughts and motivations, he often seems a flat character. This impression deceives, for long before his narrative ends, he has made it clear that this unemotional flatness exists because he is a sociopath.

Muldrow eventually reveals himself to be a cold, selfish killer, a misanthropic predatory loner, possessing a calculating mind that usually focuses on efficiency in his killings and his survival tactics. The ultimate macho warrior, he only gains joy by winning victories, which while sometimes triumphing against threats from nature, are usually killings

This realization for the reader comes slowly as initially Muldrow seems a normal person, one who shows heroic qualities. The obviously sadistic and obsessive colonel who talks on in a debriefing about the upcoming mass fire-bombing of Tokyo repels him. He also avoids a fight with a braggart, demonstrating his superior physical abilities by turning the confrontation into an amiable contest. In the scene at the base, he advises a new recruit on survival and expertise and quietly prepares for his next mission, going beyond regulation requirements.

His behavior at the base, where others consider him their best gunner, make him seem a perfect soldier. Although the gunners are exempt from the next mission, he prefers to go rather than stay at the base as he does not want to sit out any raids playing ping-pong and watching corny films. He dislikes the way others have turned their military hut into a home with pinups and he has his improved knife and flint fire starters, because he finds army issue inadequate.

In these early scenes at base there are already indications that what might make a perfect soldier might also make a disturbing, extremely dangerous person, one who destroys humanity rather than protects it. He finds it

pathetic that the others waste time writing home, he feels glad that he has nobody to write to so as to save time. When the new recruit starts trying to pick a fight with him, we get an opinion about him from outside himself and it rings the first clear warning as the wannabe fighter gets a reminder that the first thing they were told when arriving at the base was not to fool with Mulrow. As Mulrow is the source of information about himself and neither he nor the warning recruit elaborates, why new recruits are so urgently warned remains not totally clear, yet, Strong indications soon emerge in the way he uses calm, identical tones to describe how both his killing knife and his flintstones function, as if no moral difference between killing someone and lighting a fire exists. When he explains to a new recruit the superiority of his flexible knife over stiffer army issue, he clinically discusses how his knife will bend or go round a rib rather than break and can even keep going through a body. He calmly discusses killing animals and humans interchangeably, comparing the different ways of destroying them. He reveals that he was the son of an Alaskan hunter who taught him to shoot and hunt when he was a toddler and that was his life before he was in the air force.

As in *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Iron Heel*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Catch-22*, *Little Big Man*, *Wargames*, *Dog Soldiers*, *Dispatches* and *Blood Meridian*, the fading away of the old religious based morality and secular idealism leads to a Hobbesian worldview. In *To the White Sea* Dickey takes this idea even further. There are no characters who recall even the failure or falsity of traditional heroism. In this novel humans are just animals located on the food chain and Mulrow's frequent murders, recollections of hunting, glorification of predators and comparisons between the species, only reinforce this. Mulrow does not strive to be a hero; he strives to succeed and survive and in doing so has heroic moments, gaining exaltation when he seems beyond morality and human limits. Such descriptions reveal another aspect of many of those who think themselves heroic, they are conceited predators who kill for their self-glorification.

Rather than develop his personality positively while in adversity as heroes do, his behavior deteriorates, even though his situation contains some aspects of the hero journey.

His hero journey is to travel through a war-torn, devastated land with a hostile populace to a distant safe-haven. After being shot down over Tokyo in March 1945, one day before the city suffered massive havoc by firebombing, his task of reaching safety becomes much harder: he realizes the extraordinary difficulties, because he was in the enemy's country everyone was his enemy and because he does not speak the language, he cannot even threaten them with death to get what he wants.

For him little more than some situations, luck and the framework of the old hero journey remain. There are no protecting gods, loyal heroines or remnants of the old heroism working for him, and donors appear only towards the journey's end. Like so many on the hero journey, Muldrow does have excellent weapons, and a compass and a map, which for a modern protagonist replace magic aids and magic weapons. For much of the journey only his abilities and his strong ruthless desire to survive sustain and protect him. He realizes this when after his initial survival, he assesses his possessions for their usefulness; his special knife and his emergency kit which appears unimportant: his resources are within him. This is what the traditional hero has, but when he considers his personal characteristics, he implicitly makes morality and decency superfluous, even dangerous characteristics, for his ruthless murders of three unarmed Tokyo civilians during the firebombing has helped him survive and he knows it as he considers his personality and actions. Extreme unrealistic optimism, even megalomania, emerge in this assessment of himself and his situation when he starts feeling better as he feels that nothing exists that he cannot do or cannot be conquered. He has no doubts about his ultimate success – he even finds the situation funny.

Funny? This adjective comes to him after murdering three civilians and seeing the horrific fire-bombing of Tokyo in which tens of thousands were burned to death in the firestorm which nearly destroyed the city.

When he kills one victim this happens because she sees he is a Westerner and will call out warnings. Clearly an act of self-preservation, he reveals much when he narrates that he thinks it is funny. He shoots another victim in the face so blood won't go over their Japanese clothes that Muldrow needs to disguise himself. Finding that the shoes are too small he looks for and finds a man with his shoe size, so he guts him to get his shoes. Muldrow's response is to be pleased with the shoe fit. Further along on his journey he kills an aged samurai, then recollects that he needs bone to sew with, so he hacks off the dead man's arm and calmly makes needles out of slivers from his femur.

All but the last of these murders occur on the night Tokyo was fire bombed and the chaos that causes helps him escape with his murders unnoticed. As they happen amidst the bombing's massive death toll this raises the question of what is murder and what is moral. Mulrow's three murders are statistically tiny compared to the hundreds of thousands who died that night; even Muldrow can see thousands dying and his killings are quick and painless, compared to the horrible deaths caused by burning, napalm, smoke inhalation and being trampled by mobs. The wartime circumstances of these killings make him seem the perfect soldier: which is an emotionless killing machine. And yet his very calmness after killing civilians makes it clear he is a monster, not merely a robotic killing machine which cannot be amused or pleased by its killings. He appears as even more than a cold-blooded perfect soldier doing what he must to survive in war. He narrates that the war for him existed as a thing to deal with, but while for others the war was the main thing, he does not need the war to be what he is.

Muldrow then reveals what he is: a killer with a Nietzschean outlook. No rules exist except those he makes and they are essential to his survival. He develops this self-aggrandizement further. In one of the passages in *To the*

White Sea which relate to tradition and myth, Muldrow sees himself as an invincible hero, going through hell to fulfil his vision of a haven.

Although his narrative reveals him as a villain and even more than that, a monster, Dickey places Muldrow in a hero's situation where he possesses the hero's luck as he survives in the fiery hell of Tokyo's worst bombing and even turns it to his advantage. Like so many heroes, he must use his resources and resourcefulness to return from a hell to home, or a dreamed of paradise, even if his choice of paradise is odd, a reversal of the fertile, pleasant, settled green lands in most hero journey stories. His reference to going upwards into snow indicates part of his dreamed of haven, a snowy unpopulated wilderness with an ocean nearby and forest and rivers, a quiet, cold, white and blue Artic heaven, a hunter's Valhalla which he controls. This is a total contrast to his current desperate state in the hell of fire-blasted Tokyo, colored orange and black from fire and soot and containing hundreds of thousands of screaming disorientated people crowded into narrow little streets.

At first his desired haven resembled his home in the wilderness on the northern slopes of Alaska's Brooks Range, as he continually recalls it with longing. This seems an Artic version of the "green mansion" in idyllic depictions and reveries about wilderness life. When Mulrow thinks of it, he reveals himself to be that familiar figure in American fiction, from Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and James Fenimore Cooper's Hawkeye onwards, the misplaced Westerner who feels hostile to the modern world and wants to escape it as soon as he can.

The near impossibility of a lone individual in wartime getting from the enemy capital of Tokyo to the Brooks Ranges works on Muldrow's astute mind, turning his hopes towards a more viable if similar haven as snow, ice and water are the same everywhere, as he knows. His repeated belief that cold and whiteness are pure wherever they are show his obsessiveness and strange attractions.

As he travels north through the Japanese countryside, he develops ideas based in this similarity, realizing that much in Japan suits him. When he utilizes his extremely well-developed skills at camouflage, he resembles a mythic character who gains power through finding a magic which makes him invisible. He makes this clear as he yearns to be invisible, both to gain knowledge and to experience being a ghost. This gives him confidence, almost invincibility, so he changes his plan, thinking rather oddly that if he ever made it back to America, he wouldn't know what to do.

This idea hints at an ambiguity. It would clearly seem to mean that Muldrow knows that getting back to Alaska can only be almost impossible, but there are other possibilities. He may *have* to stay in hiding not just because he is a fugitive enemy soldier in Japan but for other reasons. At the base he described how he had nobody to write to, but even if he did, he would not write as he did not want them knowing about what he was doing. This evasive contradiction serves as a warning. Rather than explain why, he changes the direction of his thoughts. He kills people too easily and with expertise, never saying that this was the first time, although the nature of his air force service also precludes face-to-face combat. He does make it clear that the war has little to do with his murders for trivial possessions. By finding these murders funny, like a sociopathic criminal would, he reveals himself as one of them. The ominous warnings given to the new recruits are now revealed to be justified, as if someone at the base knew something that Mulrow hints at.

As his journey north continues, he gives more strong evidence that he is not only a cold-blooded soldier killing from self-preservation, but a homicidal maniac with a past in America he wishes to avoid. As he passes some houses, he describes how low their lights were because the inhabitants were revealing secrets. This gets him thinking of another house elsewhere. Soon after he sneaks around to stare at a family, feeling he has some power over them because unseen, he can flash a knife at them, catching the light from their room on his upheld blade. His feeling of

exaltation while he does this seems to recall some unspecified past event. When he murders an aged passerby because she sees him, he amuses himself by cutting her head off and then watching it rotate on a water wheel. He starts revealing something of his crime (or at least one of them) when he talks of the Kansas girl, a visitor on the Brooks Range. He ultimately reveals in asides that he killed her with one hand and buried her in the range. His obsession with the blood red wall in his father's cabin also never gets a full explanation.

Even though he is a sociopath, he still experiences aspects of the hero journey, although his killings often warp them. When he finds the isolated idyllic waterfall and stays there for a few days, resting and living on caught fish, this reveals some reality, even fulfilment within the green mansion dream. His rest works to restore both his physical strength and his confidence. Muldrow also unintentionally echoes the mythic origins of such rituals, but his belief in the conferred invincibility by his rest in this idyllic locale reveals his hubris, rather than any conferred invincibility. He compares his stay here to having consumed something magical or having taken a blood transfusion with something better than blood. The imagined effects mean that blades cannot penetrate him and bullets fired directly at him would have curved to miss. Where the delusional madness of a megalomaniac takes over from hubris becomes a needed question at this point in the narrative.

This rejuvenating interlude works as one of the few motifs Dickey uses which does not show a disillusioning and ironic usage of traditional heroic tales. Muldrow gains helpful objects such as the shoes and Japanese clothes not by the aid of donors, but by plundering them after he kills their owners. When he wanders into the forest, finding the swan's park and lake and sees the aged caretaker in his cottage, this setting and motif suggests the magic world of the donor, but Muldrow creeps up behind the old man and knifes him while he tends to an injured swan. He then goes out and slaughters the swans for food and feathers.

When he meets the American monk who takes him to his ancient monastery the setting situation and dialogue also recall aspects of more traditional tales. The donor and the travelling hero share bonds, not only accepted hospitality, but in this case language and nationality in a foreign enemy land. The American monk gives advice along the usual traditional lines, for Muldrow to clear the mind of worldly matters that make him unhappy, to listen to his visions which comes with dreams and to appreciate nature and religion. When the monk offers a vision of snow falling on rocks as an inspiration, an example of the void all should seek, Muldrow rejects it, although it closely resembles his own vision of paradise. However, the donor here ultimately becomes false, as he apparently betrays Muldrow to the Japanese.

As in many traditional tales, a duel occurs between two ably matched warriors, but once again this becomes ironic and shows the calculating monster behind the heroic warrior. Muldrow creeps into a Japanese home and finds himself battling an aged, nearly blind samurai. They fight with knife and sword, which like the setting, recalls older Medieval conflicts, just as the samurai's declining physical state reminds that he is archaic. After Muldrow kills the samurai and takes some of his bone slivers, he kills the harmless old wife. In all three of these settings, the swan's shelter, the countryside home and the monastery, Muldrow brings violence and disorder to an ordered, peaceful scene. Far from being a protecting hero, he is the menace which the swan protector could not expect and from which the samurai tried to protect his home. The fact that Japan, the fascist aggressor fights democratic America becomes ironic in these settings, as their enemy Muldrow is the fascistic aggressor against peaceful civilians.

During the journey he also reveals another aspect of his personality, amazingly that of the poet. Throughout the novel there are many amazingly poetic passages as in his recollection of seeing an iceberg break off a glacier in his longed-for wilderness. Muldrow's poetic side goes

beyond such descriptions, as his account of the shared energy of hunting with a spear while encircling hawks on Hokkaido shows.

His poetic visions are based in close identification with the natural world. Like Icarus and many other traditional heroes, he gains a superhuman vision from nature, but he senses that the hawks' visions go beyond that of any man; both in the physical sense and spiritually, seeing into the nature of things.

This close identification with nature links to his other role, that of the predatory animal. Having spent most of his life hunting in the wilderness with little if any human company, his identification with animals soon appears, but initially does not appear extreme. While hiding in Tokyo's sewerage pipes he thinks of how a marmot or a badger feels when threatened, they make it to their sheltering holes, or how the snowshoe hare feels when he knows that the color of his camouflage works as protection. These thoughts also show the beginning of his idea of gaining invisibility by imitating the way animals and reptiles use coloring for camouflage and use the environment for concealment. By doing this he starts becoming part of the natural world, moving further away from Japan's human world, where most of the threats towards him emerge. He has developed an animal's sensitivity to danger, sensing a lynx's presence in one scene and the silent presence of threatening humans in another. He reveals both the cost of his identification with nature and his paranoid savagery when in Japan he howls like a wolf at the sight of a herd of caribou, recalling how with a group of hunters in Alaska he had done the same at the sight of caribou blood. While hungry he gives an insight into his insane mind, which becomes closer to that of a predatory animal than any soldier.

He states that he was no longer a lynx Now he was hunting something about his size while a taste for blood existed in his mouth, even in his whole body. He - or his body, had borrowed some intangible power from snakes. This power felt stronger than anything else in existence, having

more power than the sun and the moon combined. Mulrow does not see this as a life force, it comes from killing and the sensation that comes just before eating when hungry when you tear flesh apart so as to eat.

He seems to understand what is happening to him, describing how such cravings for blood is driving him into craziness, but he has no control because he likes it, wants more and like a drug addict he will do anything to get what he craves. Like his murders, a compulsive, repetitive form to his carnivorous hunger dominates and he knows that he exists as a slave to bloodshed and does not want freedom from it. He imagines that he has claws, then talks of how he ate hares and virtually nothing else (140) While hunting he refers to his tracks being so light a ghost could have made them. He then turns his reverie into boasting, claiming to be as strong as a bear and able to climb like a squirrel. With these identifications with the animal kingdom and an admittance, even a glorification of his addiction, he has given a discourse open to many different interpretations.

When combined with his other actions and statements he could easily be seen to be a raving obsessive who believes himself to be an animal. His words could also be seen to be an extreme example of a hunter's bravado, in the tradition of *Davy Crockett's Own Story* where that heroic hunter also makes continual comparisons between himself and the animal world. Crockett says that he resembles "a jackdaw" describes setting on an enemy "like a wild cat" "felt wolfish all over" at the prospect of killing Indians and answers owls when they hoot.¹ He takes to water like a beaver breaks like a horse on a bear hunt is "hunted like a wild varment" and can be as cunning as "a little red fox."² Like Muldrow, Crockett (or his ghostwriter) goes further than comparisons when he describes himself as being "Half-

¹ Davy Crockett, *Davy Crockett's Own Story As written by Himself*. 1834-1836. Stamford CT; Longmeadow Press, 1992 p. 15 p,27 p. 59 p.61

² Crockett, p. 113 p.123 p.157 p.157.p.154

horse, half-alligator, a little touched with snapping turtle.”³ This is not to say that the bantering, jolly Crockett was obsessed to the humorless level of Muldrow, and that both men are totally the same. However, other evidence emerges, showing that Muldrow’s distasteful, fictional first-person account shows some of the realities behind the myth of the heroic hunter. Beneath the banter and witty hyperbole Crockett also gives extended details of his callous killings and also alternates the killing of Indians and animals as if little difference exists between them. When he recounts eating potatoes plundered from below dead Indians which are “stewed in fat meat” because “we were all as hungry as wolves” he becomes more savage than Muldrow.⁴ Both men share a triumph in the kill and repeatedly give detailed descriptions of their hunts. Like Muldrow, Crockett frequently rages against government control and the world outside his wilderness, that land that he sees as the worthwhile world, even the real world. These similarities show that Muldrow’s ways are not a betrayal of the heroic wilderness ideal but a continuation of it, although in an unusual setting and without the community support predecessors like Crockett enjoyed. Crockett could cover much of the savagery of wilderness life with brave images and with his wit, folksy wisdom, homilies and diatribes against city slickers and sly politicians. James Fenimore Cooper and the censorship codes of times sanitized much of Hawkeye’s world. That sanitizing process had crumbled in both literature and film by end of the 1960s. Those who tried to live by these ideals and the heroic image and who did not die in the attempt survived as ironic, quixotic or as part of a deconstruction or an exposè. Whichever of these ways was depicted new fiction in the old image became unsustainable outside comic books and the formula plots of mainstream television. Muldrow does remain in the tradition, for he still searches for the old dream of men like Boone, Crockett, and Hawkeye,

³ William C. Davis *Three Roads to the Alamo: The lives and Fortunes of David Crockett, James Bowie and William Barret Travis*. New York; Harper/Collins. 1999. Davis quoting Crockett, p.314

⁴ Crockett, p.71.

seekers of the abundant untrammelled, ungoverned wilderness. When he finds it, that dream dies in its fulfilment.

Muldrow connects his search for that safe haven to his extreme identification with creatures. Implicitly he reveals this in his many descriptions of creatures in his haven and the way animals come before people and terrain in his wonderings about what Japan's north would be like.

When he does reach his supposed safe haven of Hokkaido his identification with animals is so strong that he turns against the hospitable hunter-gather Bear people because they torment bear cubs and will kill them in a way he dislikes, with much noise, dancing, singing and even speeches. After being injured when rescuing one of their elders from savage animals, Muldrow seemed to be in a familiar situation from traditional and colonial tales. He, the civilized white man, is taken in and nursed by a primitive tribe who he grows to understand and like and they reciprocate. This resembles the taking of the hero's place in an admiring community after the hero journey. This lasts until the bears' Mistreatment.

He narrates that he was wrong about them, being fooled by their friendliness and courage. They were the same as men everywhere, doing what the others did, making ceremonies and music to cover their guilt in how they got furs and meat, then doing the same things as the others. They wanted bear meat and furs, and their guilt about it set up all that singing and dancing. He sees the animals as being better than humans and he knowingly turns his heart against the tribe.

Muldrow's rejection of people also becomes a rejection of other aspects of the hero journey, particularly ritual and friendship. He spontaneously murders the elder he saved as he smilingly touches Muldrow's hand in friendship, then Muldrow leaves for his solitary snowy paradise, which exultant and content, he finds.

Muldrow might despise obvious ritual, but his celebratory dance when he finds his icy paradise appears ritualistic. Once again, the hero has his triumph at the hero journey's end, although it seems odd and pointless, one solitary individual in a barren, desolate, snow-covered landscape. For Muldrow heaven is freedom and unpredictability and the new land represents these qualities.

When he follows the hawks he finds another a birdman, a donor, but one whose feeble condition and incapacity to communicate verbally shows that he operates as only a shadow of the archetype. He gives Muldrow food and shelter and care of the hawks. This gift has its magic aspect, binding Muldrow to the birds so intensely that they displace his other favorites and embody much of what he loves about nature, but what he loves reveals not only his twisted, insanely violent personality, but the emotionally crippled monster that is the perfect soldier. He cannot love women, only other killers like himself.

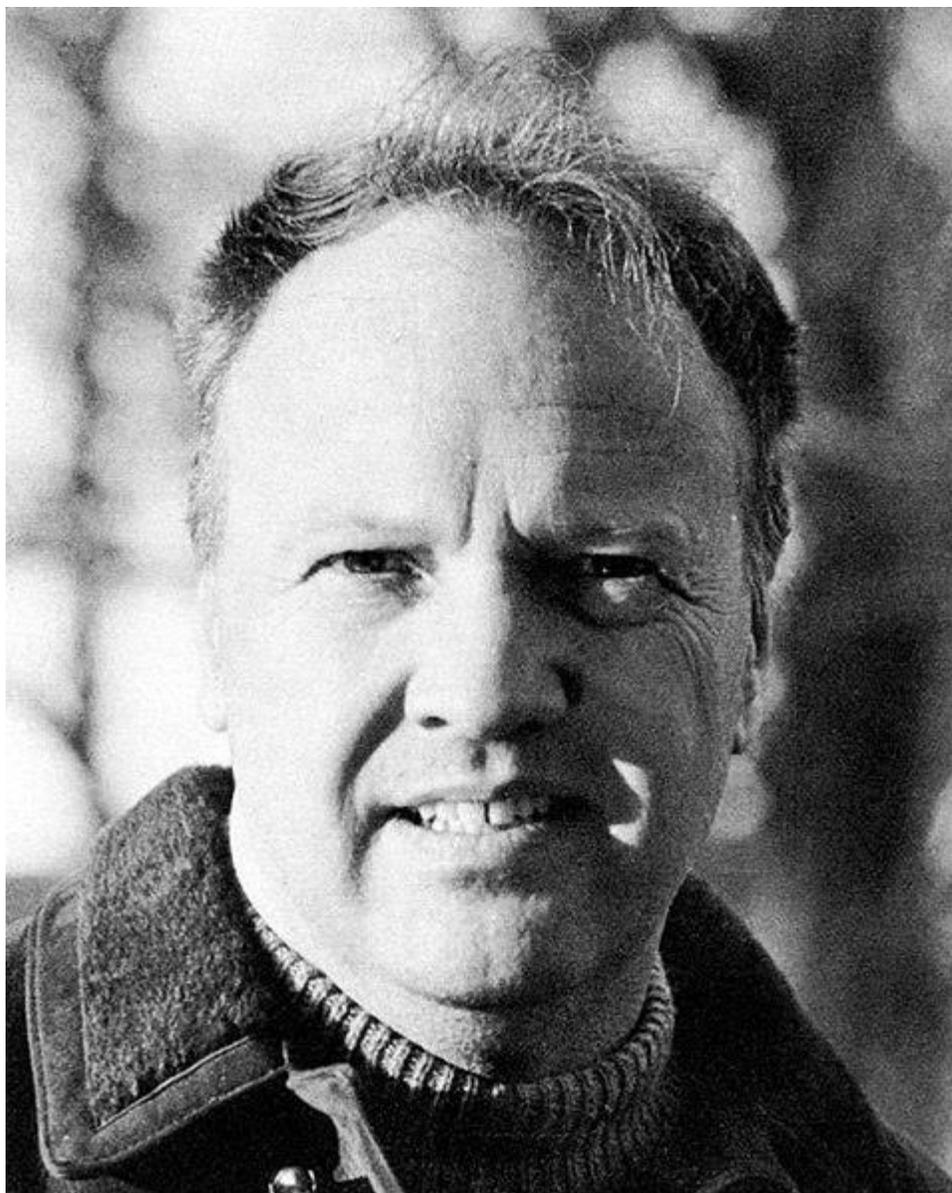
The other dimension goes beyond his love of violence, which even with Muldrow, works as a means to an end. The hawks help him be nearer to what he wants to be, his craving necessity. They blend with and express his megalomaniac personality, making it stronger, embodying omniscient power and total freedom as he sees it, being near them makes him resemble them, brings him closer to being what he wants to be - his own god.

Like Icarus, his hubristic vision leads to his fall. Muldrow wakes to find the hut surrounded by armed men, but this time he does not flee or fight, he has fulfilled himself, he recalls the days of hunting and concludes that time has passed. Instead, he thinks of how he is ready as it is time. Covering himself in feathers and blood like a Neolithic warrior and thinking of animals going to heaven, these aspects, once traditional in neolithic or ancient societies are preposterous for an American airman in 1945. He calmly walks out into the gun blasts, feeling their heat for a moment, then welcoming the cold of death as he associates it with his concept of heaven.

He welcomes his death as what he spent all his life searching for. An obvious contradiction exists in using life to search for death and this contradiction appears evident in the way he survived from falling into Japan until Japanese men surround his hut, months and many near escapes later. Rather than being purely the means of self-preservation they initially seemed to be, all his hunting and fighting were also a search for death. In his last minutes this man who has been obsessed with death and violence all his life exuberantly embraces both, for now his quest has ended in satisfaction, nothing else exists that he can do.

With no further challenges, threats or anything to defend in his snowy wasteland, his destructive instincts turn in on himself. His inability to love anyone or assimilate into any society leaves him no options. He cannot function in a community, let alone rejuvenate or lead, as a hero should. He can only continually repeat the experiences of hunting. These experiences are beginning to pall. (268) Instead, he draws into the world of the hawks, which while not palling yet, soon must, as it is an unvarying world of daily retrieval that leads nowhere beyond their landscape, which being so pure because it is barren. The idea of the wilderness retreat is now clearly dead; for even in his remote undesirable locale, authority arrives to oppress.

Muldrow's life demonstrates that the perfect soldier can be very different figure to the perfect hero, the perfect soldier shares more aspects with the traditional villain, both destroy life, both must dominate wherever they are. Mulrow also demonstrates the ultimate emptiness in the character of the selfish killer, for both figures leave nothing behind in their wastelands but deaths. Literature however, never stays in a vacuum, for in the 1990s new figures appeared who would present alternatives to the selfish heroes of the Reagan-Bush era.



James Dickey 1923-1997

This essay is a segment from my forthcoming book *From the French and Indian War to Afghanistan: Tradition and Change in the Concept of The American Military Hero in Literature*.

Copyright Concerns

Frontspiece: 'Mori' (forest) 1926 By Katayama Bokuyo (1900-1937) Public Domain/Wikimedia.

Portrait: By Christopher Dickey taken in 1970.

Illustrations:

Both pictures are from *Wikipedia/Wikimedia*, Wiki and are in the public domain. They are also allowable under Australian law through two rules. Permission is granted for using illustrations for review purposes. Teachers are also allowed to recreate and use images for study from websites., but not to sell. The author is a qualified, registered and active teacher. Similarly, under American law 'Fair Use' allows images for non-profit, educational purposes and these apply here. Those same laws indicate that attribution should be given. Where this is easy, as with a source such as *Wikipedia* or *Creative Commons*, attribution comes with the caption. Others have attribution problems. Ownership can change as companies buy up sources. Others give their names with images that may not originate with them. In both cases I recommend that readers find the original attribution by holding the cursor arrow over an image. This will give the first credit, which may or may not be the original source. Frequently further links can be made by holding shift and a left click simultaneously. If any illustration used here appears against the owner's wishes the owner can either request acknowledgement under the caption in words of their choosing or ask for removal.

Unless you are a reviewer working under Australian law or a qualified Australian teacher doing your own research, do not lift pictures from this

work as you might be in legal trouble with the owners for copyright violations.

Under American law “fair use” is allowed for non-commercial, educational purposes with attribution.

Text: The text is copyright. Fair dealings for purposes of study or criticism is allowed. For the whole book storage in electronic systems or bound printed out copies for library research is also allowed. Communication on this would be appreciated. Selling copies becomes another matter and is not allowed without permission.

Copyright ©