MYTHIC CHARACTERS IN JAMES DICKEY'S DELIVERANCE

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Abdulhafeth A. Khrisat
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Judy R. Rogers  
Director of Thesis

Master's Committee: Judy R. Rogers, Chairman

Marc Driver

May 4, 1984  
Date
Before the publication of his novel, Deliverance, James Dickey had authored numerous books of poetry and criticism. From 1966 to 1968, he served as poet-in-residence at the Library of Congress and later in the same capacity at the University of South Carolina. Dickey's subsequent titles included advertising executive and fighter pilot. Dickey was an athlete in college and he liked to hunt and play the guitar. According to the critic Geoffrey Wolff, it is the special signature of Dickey's verse that in it both contains and resolves opposites, reflecting his "biographical paradoxes" (Newsweek, March 30, 1970, p. 95A.)

In Self-Interviews, Dickey says that he was working both "semiconsciously and quite consciously toward mythologizing my own factual experience." Dickey also adds
that "the ancient Biblical and Greek myths are always reclaimable if you can bring something new to them." Thus Dickey has attempted to create a mythic poetry and a mythic novel, Deliverance.

Since most studies of the novel emphasize the characters' struggle for survival and the creation of man's own moral code to survive, this study will focus on the underlying mythological themes and patterns that Dickey employs. The characters in Dickey's Deliverance have their origins in classic myths. In examining mythic characters, the thesis will add a new dimension to the study of the novel and provide a detailed analysis of Dickey's use of mythology.

At the first glance, the novel is nothing more than a primitive adventure tale of murder and perversion in the wilds of the South. The Chicago-Tribune citation on the front cover of the Dell printing (1979) of the book tells of "pure adventure, the extremeties of fear and danger."

This thesis will endeavor to show how James Dickey's Deliverance can be understood in various mythological types and events. In particular, the transformations of characters in the novel will be seen to parallel certain stages that the mythological hero experiences. For this
purpose, a chapter will be devoted to mythology and its significance for the working novelist. Another chapter will discuss Dickey's Deliverance in terms of its similarities to various mythological characters and themes. The thesis will conclude with a definition of myth as reflected in Dickey's own special view of the man-nature conflict, its meaning, its purpose, and its outcome.

The primary source will be the novel, Deliverance. Other sources include Dickey's Sorties, Self-Interviews, conversations with Dickey and critical analyses of the novel. For information on myths, references will be obtained from books dealing with mythology.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

James Dickey is an American poet and novelist. Before the publication of his novel *Deliverance* in 1970, he had authored numerous books of poetry and criticism. His poetry volume *Buckdancer's Choice* received the 1966 National Book Award. From 1966 to 1968 he served as poet-in-residence at the Library of Congress and later in the same capacity at the University of South Carolina. His later occupational titles included advertising executive and fighter pilot. Dickey liked to hunt and play the guitar. He was also an athlete in college. According to Geoffrey Wolff, it is the special signature of Dickey's verse that it both contains and resolves opposites reflecting his "autobiographical paradoxes":

Thus the fighter pilot looks from a poet's height at the beauty of the fire unleashed. Thus the poet sings and accompanies his own song and the athlete dances to it. But Dickey's most fruitful metaphor is the hunt,
and his chosen instrument is the bow armed with arrows. His poems are full of the experience. And of the targets: animals stalked, especially wounded, dead.

Although Dickey is a Southerner, he prefers not to write in the tradition of Southern novelists like William Faulkner and Eudora Welty, because his attitude toward writing a novel, as he says, is to "avoid Southern novels about families." Dickey adds, I don't believe it's a question of my overfamiliarity with the subject [Southern novels] at all. But they are among the most boring of all novels to me, no matter how subtly refined they are, or how true to life. Whenever I see one in a bookstore, I go on by.

Dickey feels that he has a great responsibility toward mankind—a great task of being "the bearer of some kind of immortal message" to human kind. He acknowledges that he does not know this "immortal message." In his poetry, Dickey emphasizes the fact that he wants his poem to "devour the reader," to involve him in an action, and
to make the poem experience that the reader will never forget. A writer, says Dickey, should commit himself entirely to the imaginative conception he has made:
"Whether a disaster, a triumph, or a commonplace, the name of the game is to get into it utterly. Everything is in that" (Sorties, p.48). What Dickey wants for the poem to be for the reader is "a kind of adventure." Perhaps Dickey is well convinced that he should concern himself with the idea, experience, conception that will attract the reader to his artistic work. By his method of presenting a state of being, whether in a novel or in a poem, Dickey conveys his message.

Dickey's work is set in the South, and while often autobiographical, it recognizes the uniqueness and richness of each individual's experience. It is not surprising that Dickey's first novel, Deliverance, is about the hunt and set along a Northern Georgia wilderness of the fictional Cahulwassee river, soon to be dammed and turned into a man-made lake. Four men set out from the city to grab at adventure in the mountain country. One is a lyric romantic; one a coward; one an eccentric seeking "a lesson, a moral, a life principle, a way;" and the fourth is the narrator." From what we know of Dickey there are parts of him in at least three of the characters."
These four amateur adventurers pit themselves against elemental forces and primitive men in a bow hunting trip, and they are brutally assaulted by two mountain men, one of whom is killed after he subjects a member of the party to an humiliating sexual attack. The survivor stalks the four and succeeds in murdering one man before he himself is hunted and killed. All evidence of the events recorded by the novel will be eradicated; and the events will exist ultimately in the mind of the narrator, who learns the river's lesson in a delayed passage to manhood.6

Lewis Medlock, the initiator and the one who insists on making the trip, owns a residential real estate business. He is bored and restless, obsessed by the idea of testing and proving himself against a series of ingenuous obstacles. He has maintained his skills of weight lifting, fly casting, spelunking, and archery. Now he will pit his strength and cunning against a wilderness even though his knowledge of some essential skills--canoeing, for example--is still rudimentary. He seeks to prove his capability for survival in a world that is both tame and threatening. The other men are Ed Gentry, a second-rate art director who narrates the story; Drew Ballinger, soft-dring sales supervisor; and Bobby Trippe, a mutual-fund salesman. Until Lewis Medlock talks them into the
expedition, they are content to remain in their suburban settings: "Once in the mountains, they meet their first unexpected obstacle: the suspicion and contempt of the hill men for city people, the sinister wilderness and unaccountability of the country and its people." 7

At first glance, the novel is nothing more than a primitive adventure tale of murder and perversion in the wilds of the South. The Chicago Tribune citation on the front cover of the Dell printing (1979) tells of "pure adventure, the extremeties of fear and danger." The inside cover tells us more:

Four solid citizens of suburbia go canoeing down a wild North Georgia river. Two are waylaid, forced to undergo sodomy at shotgun point by two degraded but believable mountaineers, and their companions kill one with an arrow intended for a deer. You're hooked, you feel every cut, grope up every cliff, swallow water with every spill of the canoe, swear with every draw of the bowstring. Wholly absorbing, dramatic, marvelous. 8
Critic Christopher Ricks complained that there is in the book a moral insensitivity: "Deliverance is too patently the concoction of a situation in which it will be morally permissible—nay, essential—to kill men with a bow and arrow." Even Dickey admits that the novel is about violence and survival.

Such readings of the novel, if they went no further, would be superficial. To understand Dickey the novelist, one must understand Dickey the poet. According to Benjamin DeMott, the strength of Dickey's poetry lies in its feeling for the generative power at the core of existence:

"A first rate Dickey poem breathes the energy of the world, and testifies to the poet's capacity for rising out of tranced dailiness—habitual, half-lived—into a more intensive physicality, a burly appetitive wanting-ness of being." Life may lead to suffering and early death, but according to one of the book's characters, Medlock, "at least one is in touch." DeMott's summary is: ". . . a kind of life that (isn't) out of touch. In a word, a classic more-life hero."

With all the complexities of the incidents and their entanglements, the book is a tale of violent adventure and presumably of inner discovery, but "exactly what is discovered?" One answer is from Dickey himself:
It seemed to me that in a situation of this sort which really just does come to gut survival, characteristics in these people over whom the veneer of civilization has placed a kind of patina, would then link up with the age-old preoccupation of men to preserve themselves—that they would feel that line up with human necessity situations that goes all the way back to the caves. And Ed Gentry, the guy who is a decent fellow and art director and so on sees what the situation like this is, is injured. Ed Gentry, because of the circumstances, is thrown into the situation where he's got to be the deliverer. Either he does what he had to do—involving killing somebody—or they all die, including himself.\footnote{14}

William Stephenson in his criticism of the novel raises the issue: Deliverance from what? For one thing, answers Stephenson, from the pressures of mechanized life. But there is more: "The vehicle is pretty obviously the Hemingway moment of 'grace under pressure'
especially the pressure of death." The experience is finally private, personal, and intellectual:

The rite of passage traditionally involves an immersion into death, from which one emerges to face life in a new way. At times the ritual involves a killing of a man. Out of chaos came order and harmony through a pattern prescribed by ritual.

In his review, Paul Gray sees at the core of Dickey's novel a primal fable of intense power: "Deliverance partakes of the bards and magic that had held audiences in thrall for thousands of years, that magic of a narrative more insistent, while it lasts, than the concerns of life itself." In the modern setting, the deliverance is initially from soft urban life and dull jobs. But Dickey sees beyond such a limited motif. In his discussion about the pattern of redemption, Barnette Guttenberg cites Wordsworth's "high argument" or concept of individual apocalypse, achieved through the integration of man and nature in an act of the creative imagination, one that Dickey repeatedly explores in terms of man's link with nature. Dickey casts himself as a Romantic poet-prophet in Ed Gentry's journey to partial victory over a fallen world:
For Dickey, Wordsworth's visionary moment of communion goes hand in hand with Nietzsche's Dionysian movement beyond good and evil. The full affirmation of life involves an ecstatic repudiation of all moral strictures. . . For Dickey, then the natural world of raw energy, the counterpart of man's subconscious mind is the Eden to which man is always drawn and from which he is inevitably separated by human consciousness, by moral knowledge. 18

The return to the wilderness in Deliverance is a metaphoric return to the hidden reaches of the self; in an atmosphere of terror, the release of the murderous capacities of the self is experienced as an exhilarating freedom: "The real core of energy in the novel comes from the exhilaration which man discovers when he escapes social normalcy to re-enter the predatory aggressive cycle of nature from which he has withdrawn at the cost of emotional wholeness. "19

Such analyses of the novel seemingly reflect Joseph Campbell's approach to mythology, where a mythological hero typically goes through three stages, initiation,
Myths are generally stories told as symbols of fundamental truths within society, usually concerned with extraordinary beings and events. They are historically one of the richest sources of inspiration for literature, drama, and art throughout the world. Dickey himself admits a mythological precedent for Deliverance:

"If there's any literary precedent to Deliverance, it's that passage as I encountered it quoted by Hyman, referring to Van Gennep's concept of the "rites de passage."  

Harry Levin sees in the Romantic movement a mythopoetic revival, that myth is raw material which can be
the stuff of literature, that underlying patterns touched upon in myths are timeless. Andrew Lytle tells of wanting to do a long piece on a society that was dead, but he found the best vehicle consisted of symbols essential to ancient mythology and reflecting archetypal experience:

The writer working out of some form of myth will accept the supernatural as operating within nature. He does not take the world as the end in itself. His form will not take the world as the end itself. His form will be some form of myth. Myth: symbol: archetype, the structure: the image: the conflict of ever recurring human experience.

The remainder of this thesis will show how James Dickey's *Deliverance* can be understood in terms of literary precedents established in various mythological types and events. In particular, the psychological transformations of characters in the novel will be shown to parallel certain stages that the mythological hero typically experiences. For this purpose, a chapter will be devoted to mythology and its significance for the working novelist. On the basis of this background knowledge, a separate chapter will discuss Dickey's *Deliverance* in terms
of its similarities to various mythological characters and themes. The thesis will conclude with a definition of myth as reflected in Dickey's own view of the man-nature conflict, its meaning, its purpose, and its outcome.
NOTES


Other references will appear in the text.

3 Dickey, p. 60.

4 Although James Dickey shares some qualities with three of the characters of the novel, Deliverance, each character is developed to reflect his own personal experience.

James Dickey is a hunter and an enthusiastic outdoors man. He is also a virtuoso on the guitar. He is a well known poet, reviewer, and critic of poetry. Born in Atlanta in 1923, he attended Clemson College where he played football; he graduated from Vanderbilt University with a master of arts in English literature. Also he served in the air force in World War II and the Korean War. He spent six years, 1955-1961, as an advertiser in New York and Atlanta. Now he teaches poetry at the University of South Carolina.

5 Wolff, p. 95A.


8 Harper's quotation in Deliverance (New York: Dell, 1979), p. i.


12 DeMott, p. 25.


16 Lindborg, p. 84.


21 Arnett, p. 295.


CHAPTER II

MYTHOLOGY AND THE NOVELLIST

One of the difficulties encountered in modern myth studies is that the term "myth" is such a controversial issue. In his approach to myth, Richard Chase says that the American writers of the twenties and thirties began to struggle to create a "mythological literature." There is a close relationship between literature and myth—myth is literature, and myth is the "aesthetic activity of man's mind." Moreover, Chase presents various views about the meaning of "myth" from philosophers, psychologists and others; each group of specialists tries to define or analyze myth according to its field of concentration. For instance, the psychologists define myth as a "collocation of sex symbols," the semanticists see myth as a kind of "curious intellectual puzzle" which involves a random mixing of symbols and signals, and the apologists regard myth as a system of established and justified beliefs.¹

In his discussion of mythology, C. G. Jung formulates the psychoanalytical theory: myth are transformed orally,
as a "rule tribal history," from one generation to another. Jung also draws a distinction between the primitive man and the civilized—the primitive experiences rather than invents myths which are unintentional statements about "unconscious psychic happenings." Psychologically speaking, the manifestations of the unconscious are put into two classes. First, fantasies that go back to the character's experiences and repressions can be completely interpreted by "individual amnesia." Second, fantasies that respond to "mythological types," to certain collective (not personal) structural elements of human psyche in general or "collective unconscious" are found in myths, dreams or visions.²

While some critics take similar positions to Chase and Jung, others disagree with their definitions of myth. For example, Mircea Eliade states that myth is a "type of human behaviour" and "an element of civilization" reflected in the dreams and fantasies of man. Myths that interested the primitive and appeared in his social life are the same myths that interest modern man. Furthermore, they appear now, repeat themselves in the unconscious, and continue in modern societies as well as in primitive ones.³ Eliade also holds that, in spite of the all scientific, realistic, and social formulas paraded in the typical nineteenth-century novel, these formulas are essentially debased myths. Devils and vampires and other
demonology still pervade the decadent fiction of the 1890's. Although people are still inclined to think of the novel as the most immediate, circumstantial and individualized of artistic forms, the faithful mirrors of actualities, they "need to be reminded that it contains the elements and continues the functions of myth."^4 This by no means implies that underlying patterns are timeless. Myth is receptive to the passage of time: "The contrast between Homer's Odysseus and Tennyson's "Ulysses," says Levin, "is nearly as complete as if the two had no genetic affinity."^5 Yet there are great similarities in some collations; Marlow's Dr. Faustus very much resembles the primordial Adam or the Titan Prometheus. The use of mythological or romantic themes need not rely on repetitions of old stories. The basic conflicts of today are very much the same as those of yesterday, however muffled and disguised, and the puzzling philosophical and human questions still remain. The archetypal experience reflects universal issues, not only romantic quests or ones which cannot be addressed unless appropriate symbolic language is employed.

What the critics have in common is that each attempts to define myth in order to give it a kind of authenticity and therefore myth will be considered worthy of study. A myth includes fairy tales and legends, but supersedes
them in that it is generally understood in its own society to be a true story, and it achieves comprehensiveness and ultimacy because it refers its society to primordial reality, the reservoir and repository of the models on which all the significant knowledge, expressions, activities of the present society are based. Whether "true" or not, a myth is an archaic form representing first principles. Myths vary in types. Cosomological myths are concerned with the creation of the cosmos. Life-crisis myths are concerned with birth, puberty, marriage and death, and are accompanied by rituals (rites of passage) which mark the passage of the individual from one state of being to another. Hunting and agricultural myths revolve around animals and the hunt: the animal is regarded both as a symbol of violence--the human break away from the world of nature--and a symbol of intimacy--the human desire to be reintegrated into the world of nature. Myths about extraordinary individuals--culture heros, tricksters, god kings, and saviors--are common. The hero-trickster plays pranks to get the better of his adversaries, and often behaves deceitfully, stupidly, or immorally. On the other hand, he leaves the ordinary earthly community to ascend into the realm of the deities to bring manking such benefits as fire or light, arts and crafts, agriculture and science. Examples are the Greek Prometheus and
the Norse Lokie.

Myth serves a useful social function, strengthening tradition by anchoring it to the reality of initial, primordial events. Myth also is a mode of thinking, at once logical and illogical, rational and irrational, encompassing the totality of modes of human awareness. Myths may thus arise from the human situation in a particular--cultural context. It is a mode of thinking just as metaphor and simile are modes of expression to the poet.

In the heroic saga is the very stuff of folk tradition. Folk heroes such as the Davey Crockett fulfill the criteria for myth:

- From the frontier setting issues a Heroic Age society; Davey Crockett is the historical figure to whom oral and written legends fasten;
- he undergoes adventures similar to those of all folk epic heroes--single combats, wanderings, love affairs. He possesses famed weapons, utters fierce boasts, displays preconscious strength, and utters death against great odds, like the other Heroic Age champions.
Modern positivist approaches seek to categorize poetry as the product of a primitive age, that it will eventually be superseded by the application of reason to the various fields of human endeavor. Others, such as Giambattista Vico and Benedetto Croce, see mythology as protohistory, not as something to be explored, but a means for interpreting phantasmagoria; in the examinations of superstitions one may find misconceptions. Harry Levin views myth as the "raw material which can be the stuff of literature; in so far as this implies a collective fantasy, it must be shared."7

Not only do the critics strive over the definition of myth but also whether to make distinctions between a myth, a legend, and folklore. As noted earlier in this chapter, Chase sees myth as "literature" whereas Frye views myth as an "archetype" and myth refers to narrative fiction. Fiction qualifies as a special kind of myth-making. Although fact must always be the criterion, when someone is out of touch with the facts, he utilizes fiction to explain the unexplainable by some sort of approximation to it. Plato's myths are notable examples of argument turning to parable. "Continually," says Levin, "in some fashion, we must rely on imaginative constructs to fill in the gaps of our knowledge."8
Other critics attempt to classify mythological fiction into types like John J. White who mentions four types: the first two must name their myths and the other two contain allusions to mythology—which, though ambiguous, may be specified as myths if the author wishes. The first category is the complete narration of a classical myth: the author names his mythological characters and settings in order to avoid ambiguity of the myths. A number of novels fall into this category; for example, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Agatha Christie's *The Labors of Hercules*. The second category is a juxtaposition of parts narrating a myth and others related to the contemporary world; the best example is John Bowen's *A World Elsewhere*. The third one is a novel that contains a pattern of references to mythology running through the work but set in the modern world; Updike's *The Centaur* may fall into this category. The last category is a novel where a mythological motif prefigures a section of the narrative as in type three. In the second two types, a distinction between mythology and archetypes is essential to interpret that work of fiction which employs myth. To decide whether a motif for a particular myth is included in the novel or whether the motif merely shares an archetypal pattern of character or events with a completely unrelated myth or any number of myths belonging to the same archetypal group seems
difficult. The problem can be seen in the illustrations of illusions that exist more in the minds of critics than in "the intentions of the author, the reactions of the reader or the reality of the fiction." The condensation or the fusion of two or more myths with one another emerges in both mythology and literature. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* offers a clear example of condensation. There are archetypal patterns in Huxley's novel that consist of the return of the Savage to the brave new world and his falling in love with one of its inhabitants, and the sense of strangeness between the lovers.

As far as fiction is concerned, Andrew Lytle sees a "double usage" of words throughout literature. The symbolic as opposed to the literal meaning is needed to seek perfection out of imperfection, "out of the fallen state of man represented by the cooperating forces fo good and evil." Lytle believes that action itself in a novel must be symbolic of the archetypal experience. The symbol must be more that just inert sign or emblem; it must represent something real in our nature. The image as symbol then becomes the clue to reading, the means by which all parts are understandable. Thus good fiction, such as *The Velvet Horn*, though realistic, can not help but often be symbolic. *The Velvet Horn*, set in the nineteenth century in the Cumberland Hill country, is noted for its richness in
symbolism, its poetic descriptions; its sensitivity to speech rythms, its metaphor and allusiveness. 12 A writer working with some form of myth may accept the supernatural as operating within nature. That is, he does not take the world as the end in itself. His form will be some form of myth depicting the conflict of the ever-recurring human experience. 13

Since the characters of Dickey's Deliverance (where the author uses a "mythological method" and creates a "mythological literature" in portraying characters in order to present reality--the human animal instinct, cruelty as part of man's nature) have their origins in classical mythology, it seems appropriate to recount the plots of the major epics. The epic tradition is well founded in the illustrious Greek epics of the Iliad, Odysseus, and Argonautica. In the Odyssey, the central theme and the subordinate motives of folktale and mythology not only combine into an artistic plot, but yield larger dramatic and spiritual unities. Despite the fact that Odysseus and Jason are cast in the role of hero tricksters, both works in which they appear are poems of wisdom. In the case of Odysseus, his sagacious faithful, much-enduring character is central, and Jason's physical prowess and courage in the pursuit of the Golden Fleece, a kind of Holy Grail, are to be admired. Both must pass
tests engineered by gods themselves. For example, Jason, in one day, must yoke two fire breathing bulls to plow an unplowed field, sow it with the remaining teeth of the dragon of Cadmus, and slaughter all the soldiers who would spring from these seeds.

Orpheus was an ancient God who had some dealings with Jason's men, some fifty demi-gods and heroes who sailed with Jason on the Argo and were called Argonauts. He had the gift of music, and there was no limit to his powers when he played and sang. He saved the Argonauts from the Sirens by playing his lyre in away that drowned the second of the lovely fatal voices. But he had dared more than any other man trying to bring his beloved Eurydice back from the underworld, the world of death. He was condemned to wander through the wild solitudes of Thrace, comfortless except for his lyre. One day, a band of maenads came upon him and "they threw the gentle musician, tearing his limbs and flung the severed head into the swift river, Hubrus." Thus even the gods are punished and meet disaster in a somewhat similar way.

Widely known today is the Greek hero, Hercules, who was the strongest man on earth and had the supreme self-confidence that magnificent physical strength gives. Hercules considered himself equal with the gods. He was
not especially bright, but plenty active and willing to take a dare. His life was a series of exploits. As part of penance incurred for one of his misdeeds, he was assigned the "labors of Hercules." There were twelve of them and each one was all but impossible for anyone but Hercules. Just as Orpheus reminds one somewhat of Ed Gentry of Deliverance, so does Hercules suggest Lewis Medlock.
NOTES


4 Levin, p. 113.

5 Levin, p. 113.


7 Levin, p. 111.

8 Levin, p. 105.


10 White, pp. 194-195.

11 Lytle, p. 148.

12 Lytle, p. 141.

13 Lytle, pp. 149-150.


15 According to classical mythology, Hercules is a man who is able to perform superhuman feats because he is the
most powerful hero. The "twelve labors" are: strangling the lion of Nemea; slaughtering the Hedra, a creature with nine horns of gold that live in Cerynitia; capturing the great boar, its lair on mount Erymatithus in Arcadia; cleansing the Augean stable in a single day; driving away the enormous numbers of Stymphalian birds; destroying the man-eating mares of King Diomede of Thrace; bringing the girdle of Hippolyta, the Queen of Amazons; capturing the cattle of Greyon, a monster with three bodies living on Erythia; winning the golden apples of Hesperides; and bringing Cerberus, the three-headed dog, from Hades.
CHAPTER III

MYTHOLOGY AND DICKER’S DELIVERANCE

In Deliverance, Dickey uses a "mythological method" and creates a "mythological literature." Although the novel seems to lack the satisfactory resolutions sought and often found in so many myths, Deliverance is much more than mere excitation or sensation. Dickey reveals in his novel's plot and characterization that every living moment reveals still more life, that fierce-life-power resides in the tamest hands.

Joyce Carol Oates sees the "horror" of Dickey's novel as growing out of its ordinary suburban framework, the assimilation of brutal events by ordinary men, not heroes, but four middle-aged, middle-class men who want to canoe along a dangerous but attractive river not far from their homes. While the novel is about our deep, instinctive needs to get back to nature, to establish some kind of rapport with primitive energies, it is also about the need of some men to do violence, to be delivered out of their banal lives by violence so irreparable that it can never be confessed. The novel is a fantasy of a highly civilized and affluent society, a society in which rites of initiation

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no longer exist. Dickey has so created his backwoods degenerates as to be beyond all human sympathy, so that most readers are compelled to become "killers" along with the narrator:

The murder of the homosexual threat, whether an exterior force or an inner impulse, results in an apparent increased animal spirits and appetite, and the narrator is able to return to civilization and to his wife, a man with a profound secret, in touch with an illicit, demonic mystery, delivered. ¹

Violence has been his salvation--his deliverance from ordinary life.

Although some readers believe that Dickey's Deliverance condemns modern man, since the businessmen start and end in a life of mediocrity, there is paradox of characterization involved that leads away from cynicism. The four modern city dwellers of the novel literally descend into a deep canyon to find their river and their epic hell. Then the chief character climbs a high, almost unscalable, cliff to ambush and destroy his enemy, ascending the heights both literally and figuratively. Armed with primitive weapons, his intelligence and his will to
survive, the civilized man, like Odysseus and Jason overcoming the dangers of their own era, overcomes the primitive man armed with the advanced weapons of civilization. Hubris is typified: for a moment Ed Gentry is Odysseus putting out the eye of Polyphemus, or perhaps Vasco de Gama leading a nation to the end of a glorious voyage. 2

At first such analysis reveals nothing of the epic or the themes typically found in myth. However to stand against a false society, a castrating society which interprets visions as "only poetry" or even false-is something of the heroic. So-called primitive societies at least benefitted from their shamans' ecstasies and bizarre revelations: "Dickey," says Joyce Carol Oates," so disturbing to many of us, must be seen in a larger context, as a kind of 'shaman'..." 3 Oates also adds that the hunting and physical risk in the novel is a kind of courting of the primitive in art and in life. Hunting is an adventure, a reflection of ancient mythological settings:

In any case, Dickey's work is significant in its expression of the savagery that always threatens to become an ideal, when faith in human values is difficult to come by or when a culture cannot accommodate man's most basic instincts, forcing them backward,
downward, away from the conscious imagination and back into the body as if into the body of an ancient ancestor; into the past, that is forbidding intelligent entry into the future. 4

While Oates see Dickey as a "king of shaman," Warren Easter complains that Dickey's vision of life, as revealed in *Deliverance*, simply will not stand up to the intense scrutiny which the modern novel must undergo: "Indeed this vision of life cannot even exist except when it is confined to the animal world, to the world of sub-humans, or to stock outdoors characters borrowed from Jack London and James Oliver Curwood." 5 But is not the social world out of which the novel's characters emerge an "animal world" all its own, rivaling that of the Southern wilds? Dickey effects a confrontation between two worlds, transforming the one into the other: the supersophisticated urban world transformed into the hard-to-describe-or explain and dangerous world. If the natural setting is too harsh to contemplate, then the original world from which the four main characters come should be even more so, but it is not. Dickey's novel, in effect, establishes his own kind of epic whose heroes are outwardly anything but heroic, but are forced by circumstance into express-
ing, however weakly or accidently, instincts which the Knights of the Round Table once openly championed. If the novel is sick, it is because society is. The four characters represent not the hero, but rather the victim.

Unboubtedly, the novel attempts to assess the value of immediacy in man's life, its theme being the necessary freshening of perception by risking extreme conditions. The mountaineers in the story are not merely "bad guys" but also personifications of mindless, random evil. They represent or supply the ingredients of an epic, heroic struggle, the stuff out of which myth is made. Dickey deals with themes that haunt modern urban man, who is faced with increasing loss of self-sufficiency. According to Donald Markos, "The novel is, in an obvious sense, a celebration of an anachronistic concept of manhood; a glorification of physical fitness, daring, coolheadedness, technical skills; but it does not propose that all men embark on canoe trips or undergo regimen of weight lifting and archery in order to salvage their manhood." Thus one must not interpret the novel too literally. One must see through the morbidity into the significance of the conflict, even though the challenge has nothing of the heroic proportions of ancient myths. Such challenge simply would not be understood by the society the four protagonists of the novel had left behind.
Perhaps the film of the novel does a better job of expressing Dickey's real intent. In the film of the same name, and also scripted by Dickey himself, action is harsh, uncertain to the end, and loaded with unexpected dangers. Even so, the filmed story reveals a complex web of multiple themes which are presented more through visible demonstration than the vehicle of dialogue. The film encourages a direct involvement with the plot, with the messages coming through directly. Hal Aigner indicates that until midway through the film, Lewis dominates the group with his swaggering bravado, setting a standard against which all the other men's performances are gauged:

There is much to suggest that he has gathered his three companions as foils for his ego. In a campfire scene in which he disappears into the night forest after having heard something or someone, his actions appear to be visibly contrived to make his friends nervous while he savors his steely calm. Regardless he is a tough character: physically strong, a good bowman, and able if necessary to kill man and beast alike.
Shades of Hercules are unmistakable here. As a determined and self-determined man, Lewis has the ability to do with his life what he wants: he thinks of going to New Zealand, traveling to South Africa or resettling in Uruguay. Lewis is obsessed with achieving something heroic because he thinks that his group are not "lesser men." His fanaticism springs not only from his admiration of the natural world but from the fact that he wants to dominate the river and to "knock the river's eyes out" (p. 38) if it challenges him.

According to Lewis, the mountains have mysteries that ordinary people cannot know, but which he has the desire to discover. Feeling a kind of hostility toward the country, Ed, Drew and Bobby keep quiet, but Lewis is the courageous hero who makes a decision and tells the man, Griner at the garage to take the cars back to the city:

"How much did you say?"
"Fifty," Griner said.
"Fifty, my ass," Lewis said.

...I [Ed] was scared to death and resentted insanely Lewis getting me into such a situation. Well, you didn't have to come, I told myself. But never again. Never. Lewis kicked the ground and turned to me.
"Are you good for ten?"..."Twenty now," Lewis said to Griner, "We'll send the rest to you. If we're good for this, we are good for the rest. Take it or leave it." (p. 59)

Griner is one of those people who has confronted the canoe men in the country—a malicious stranger. Dickey has stated that being set upon by malicious strangers is the focus, the focal point of the novel:

I think the foremost fear of our time, especially with the growing crime rate, crime in the cities and so on, the most, the thing we're most terrified of is being set upon by malicious strangers who would just as soon kill you as look at you. Life and death up in those Georgia hill counties, life and death are very basic gut-type things, and if somebody does something that violates your code, you kill him, and you don't think twice about it. 9

While the problem of returning the cars with Griner is solved peacefully, the confrontation with the two mountain-eers is presented violently because Dickey places emphasis
on telling a good action story: "One of the things I wanted to do in Deliverance was to show the energizing of certain capacities in men which ordinarily do not have a chance to emerge." The setting of the novel's action mirrors the urban setting out of which the four "heroes" have come. For example, the refusal of the four to jury trial by local citizenry reflects the presence of social suspicion, whether of hill billy or city slicker.

The typical hero of mythology experiences a rite of passage traditionally involving a plummeting into death, from which one emerges to face life in a new way. This ritual may involve a killing of a man through a pattern prescribed by ritual. Early in the novel, Ed set out from the city with limited objective sight and his eyes "open shut without seeing anything" (p.38). But he achieves a "new born moonlight vision":

I beheld the river in its icy pit of brightness, in its far-below sound and indifference, in its large coil and tiny points and flashes of the moon, in its long sensuous form, in its uncomprehending consequence. What was there? Only that terrific brightness. Only a couple of rocks as big as islands, around one of
which a thread of scarlet seemed to go, as though outlining a face of a king of god...and what it was pulsing with was me...my face: Why not? I can have it as I wish...I thought I saw the jaw set, breathing with the river and the stone. (pp. 146-147)

The river plays no small part in the story, both as a natural obstacle and as a symbol. For Ed Gentry, "the river was mindless with beauty. It was the most glorious thing I have ever seen" (p. 146). The allegory of Deliverance is completed when the beautiful but dangerous river is dammed by the government and its water covers the entire area, obliterating forever the voyage into the past, the visit to Hades. One possible moral here is that when he is forced to act, civilized man will rise to the occasion and save civilization, even if it seems highly unworthy of being saved. Ed sees himself in his true relation to the river, noting that he could have it as he wishes, and conceives the river rock in the shape of his face, "breathing with the river." In this visionary moment, says Guttenbery, a kind of marriage takes place, described by Wordsworth as "the discerning intellect of man... wedded to his goodly universe." As Ed climbs the cliff, he climbs "with the most intimate motions
of my body, motions I had never dared use with Martha [his wife], or with any other human woman" (p. 151). Like Wordsworth's, Dickey's visionary moment involves the birth of the creative imagination in the natural world of vitality, "a kind of spiritual communion." 

However, Dickey parts company with Wordsworth insisting on the irredeemable savagery of the life-force, for Ed has learned to see in the river "pure energy" and its "unbelievable violence and brutality" (p. 124). The full affirmation of life involves an "ecstatic repudiation of all moral strictures." Although Ed has ascended to vision, he also ascends to evil:

I turned. Well, I said to the black stone at my face, when I get to the top the first thing I'll do will be not to think of Martha and Dean again, until I see the. And then I'll go down to the first stretch of calm water and take a look around before it gets light. When I finish that I'll make a circle inland, very quiet, and look for him like I'm some kind of an animal. What kind? It doesn't matter, as long as I'm quiet and deadly. I could be a snake. Maybe I can kill
him in his sleep. (pp. 148-149)

Not only does Ed ascend to evil, but also he becomes more concerned about his life. As he was climbing the cliff, "all I wanted was my life" (p. 161) because he felt that was a "kind of deadly charade." As Ed scales the cliff in pursuit of the dangerous mountaineers, the dionysian moment builds in tension by stages. The setting of Ed Gentry's ascent is depicted as an arena of combat, in terms that convey the sense of time, standing still before the epic confrontation:

The river has spread flat and filled with moonlight. It took up the whole space under me, bearing in the center of itself a long coiling image of light, a chill, bending flame. I must have been seventy-five or a hundred feet above it, hanging poised over some kind of inescapable glory, bright pit. (p. 139)

Time resumes its processional as he "turned back into the cliff" (p. 139). The cliff is an adversary which must be vanquished; it proves a formidable adversary: "Panic was getting me. I held on" (pp. 139-140). Again there is a halt in the action as Gentry collects his inner resources by assessing his progress up the cliff: "Let me look now. That is all there is to do, right at
this moment. That is all there is to do..." (p. 146).

The act of looking may be all there is to do, but from the act of looking, Gentry finds significance in his climb, in how far he has ascended: "It just came down to where I was, and what I was doing there" (p. 146).

For Dickey, the natural world of raw energy is the Eden to which man is always drawn and from which he is separated by moral knowledge. The world beheld by Ed is, in this sense, prehuman: "The river was blank and mindless with beauty" (p. 146); "...I felt better; I felt wonderful, and fear was at the center of the feeling: fear and anticipation there was no telling where it would end" (p. 147). Like Orpheus, one dare not try or dream too much, at least if one wishes to escape serious consequences.

The pattern of development is symbolically restated in terms of Ed's fall into the river. Ed begins by leaving the river. Ed begins by leaving the world of sterility and enters into a union with the river which involves a violation reminiscent of the rape scene. The world whose fragments he could not quite integrate is transfigured in a visionary moment. As Ed reaches beyond human limitations, his humanity emerges: He feels that the trees are "beautiful" and nature is quite fascinating but man, represented by the government, tries to figure a way to get
rid of the trees. He also conceives his relation to nature, a force to which man owes his existence. Finally, Ed returns to his own world, the only world in which he can breathe.

In all this, Guttenberg sees a pattern of redemption. Society, from Dickey's romantic point of view, can be whole again. Dickey implies that what works for Ed and Lewis might work for mankind, that society is potentially an organic artifact, with its forms and values being shaped from the life process by the redeemed imagination. Society, however, continues to separate from the life process by damming its rivers. Ed, reborn, finds himself an outsider; he and Lewis live permanently apart from the city, "occupying a private oasis in the wasteland."

The more immediate redemption offered by Deliverance through its river is only individual and psychological. In the city, Ed senses a deathly sleep in which he lacks freedom, vitality, identity and love. In the vital and uncaring wilderness, he is freed from "obsessive gentility." A savage union with the wilderness results in a communion with it, a fusion of the natural world and subconscious self into unity. But Guttenberg sees in all this only a qualified kind of "deliverance":

However, such holy wedlock between nature and man, unlike Wordsworth's,
provides a false deliverance. It cannot last, for the prelapsarian unity, in Dickey's view, lacks moral dimension, so that the embrace of Eden and its savage trees means the loss of the human. (Guttenberg, p. 91)

Accordingly, Ed returns to man's sphere, even though unwillingly. Having tapped the wilderness of his being by encountering the river, Ed can effect a Jungian reintegration of the divided psyche. He can then construct a private realm like that of the man and the boy at the end of the journey fishing by the bridge. They are in touch with the vital river, thereby linking nature and man's world, a kind of redemption where love, identity, and freedom can exist.

According to William Stephenson, "the artist in our Western culture usually suffers Orpheus' fate." So Drew Ballinger, the man who knows too much and sees too clearly, must be sacrificed. Perhaps he sees that the brotherhood of man can be built, but not on Lewis individualistic premises—the urge to escape man's limitations in order to build a new society in the wilderness. Instead, Drew, and perhaps even Dickey, possibly entertain conservative notions of mankind's unity, music and law,
rather than reckless freedom and salvation through violence.

Dickey's *Deliverance* does lack the resolutions found in so many myths. The readers may feel that Gentry's triumph has been earned by callousness that is the antithesis of the heroic, in view of his apparently having undergone no moral transformation. Paul Gray raises a crucial point here: "The reader wants to know whether he is meant to share with the author an ironic apprehension of Gentry's behavior or whether he and the author parted company, and the text simply does not offer sufficient evidence on this point." In fact, Ed tries to imitate Lewis because of his eagerness and fascination with "Medlockism," that encourages him to make the journey from the city to the depth of nature. When Ed enters the world of nature, he begins to change because this return to nature is a return to a state of primitivism where he recovers the heroic dimension lost to him. Although neither the author nor the text does offer a resolution, the reader sympathizes with Ed and feels that Ed performs a kind of "heroic" act, because the mountaineers represent not only evil but also code-breakers.

If some reviewers of *Deliverance* would seek to understand Dickey more as the mystic poet and cosmic
thinker, they would flounder less on dichotomies such as man-nature, social-natural, and the like which pit man's mind and intelligence against a seemingly inert and mind-less world of nature. As a matter of fact, Dickey employs hunting, adventure, the wilderness and the river in order to reflect ancient mythological settings. Moreover, his characters perform mythic roles like Jason and Odysseus overcoming the dangers of their time: Lewis is Hercules and Ed is a typical mythological hero who undergoes through three stages, initiation, separation and return. In Ed's beholding the river in its existential uniqueness, there is perhaps a union with the totality of being. Dickey deals with larger cosmic questions in his other poetic works.
NOTES


3 Oates, p. 258.

4 Oates, p. 263.


10 Heyen, p. 154.

11 Adams, p. 310.

18, No. 3 (1970), 83. Other references will appear in the text.


CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

On the surface, James Dickey's *Deliverance* is an adventure story, a tale of brutality, murder, and sexual perversion. It is beyond doubt quite absorbing and dramatic. It is an individual and psychological biography of four men out for adventure for entirely different reasons. It is a social commentary in the sense of revealing the reactions and inner transformations of four individuals, feeling the humdrum boredom of an insensitive urban existence who journey into the wilds of the South. The raging Cahulawassee, the rugged mountain terrain, the hostile and murderous mountain men, and the story of murder and revenge all contribute to the making of a plot for filming—which it was.

But it is more. It depicts the reaching for "more life, an attempt to penetrate to the core of existence from which rises a generative power." The train of events in the story serves to put the soul "in touch" with itself by transcending daily, habitual half-life. It is simultaneously a tale of violent adventure and
inner discovery. The veneer of civilization is tossed off and certain discoveries are made, a kind of "grace under pressure" of death.

It is a primal fable of intense power. Dickey explores romantic theory, without wholeheartedly accepting it in the novel. Dickey emphasizes the full affirmation of life in that one Dionysian moment which repudiates moral strictures, in the action. In the moment, pre-existing human strictures, including the barrier of fear, are burst asunder, as the ordinary person discovers what he is capable of doing—what no society could or would tell him. For Dickey, the natural world of raw energy is the Eden from which man is separated by human consciousness and moral knowledge.

The return to the wilderness is a metaphoric return to the hidden reaches of primordial self, and the release of the murderous capacities of the self is experienced as an exhilarating freedom. There is a mythological precedent in the story in the sense of the entire story being taken as a ritual—in Dickey's own words, a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return, comparable to the initiation, separation, and return experienced by the typical hero of mythology adopted by Joseph Campbell. Dickey found the best vehicle for his story was the principle of the myth,
although not the historically established traditional myth.

The reactions depicted in the story are in many instances like those of an Odysseus, a Jason, or a Hercules, as when Ed climbs the cliff or when Lewis seeks to dominate the group with his false bravado. While many early myths find their heroes already in nature and fighting to preserve themselves and higher truths, the protagonists of Deliverance must actually struggle to get back to nature. However, it is a kind of general savagery fully confused. The ritual (rites of passage) found in Deliverance is a pale reflection of ancient mythological settings and much too masked to be obvious or meaningful to most readers. Perhaps Dickey is too theoretical in merely wanting to show that certain capacities in men can emerge, capacities hidden in the soft, urban life. The ritual of Deliverance is well-hidden in the details of the adventure story.

Dickey's novel certainly does have the elements of myth. The concept of individual apocalypse, achieved through the reintegration of man and nature in an act of the creative imagination is here, and uniquely emphasized by Dickey. But the "high argument" is lacking, or at least not overtly stated. There is no explicitly stated moral redemption accompanying the reintegration of the


-----------. "The Yearning for Paradise in Primitive..."


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