

Deliverance: Bridging the Urban/Rural Divide?

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Written in 1970 by Atlanta-born James Dickey, the novel *Deliverance* is a commentary on the stereotypes for both rural and urban Southerners at the time. The story begins with the main character, Ed Gentry, along with his fellow white suburban Atlantan friends Lewis, Drew, and Bobby as they plan a last-chance canoe trip on the fictional Cahulawassee river located in northern Georgia before it is dammed and flooded. As the group leaves the suburbs of Atlanta for the forests of the rural north, the land and the people living there seem foreign and backward to Ed, and the group seems foreign and backward to the people who live there. Despite initial reservations about the condition of the river and the locals that live around it, the group floats on to what appears to be an enjoyable time. This enjoyment, however, doesn't last long. A day that begins with dreams of nature and a short hunting excursion quickly becomes a hillbilly nightmare. Through Dickey's descriptions and the characters' thoughts and actions, *Deliverance* examines Southern stereotypes and divisions and says that even though rural and urban Southerners may have common humanity, their differences are irreconcilable.

Dickey's views of the South can be fully understood by examining the history of the typical poor white Southerner stereotype and the cultural divisions in the South. The idea of the poor, white trash Southerner has a long history. According to the paper, "Trashed: The Myth of the Southern Poor White," before the United States was even a country, the South's identity "was relegated to a state of otherness" (Thompson). Even in the South's beginning, the poorer people living there were being pushed further into the fringes of the land and society. They were relegated into a lower class by the rich Southern whites as well as dehumanized and mocked by

intellectual northerners. These problems continued through the Civil War where the poor white man was vilified by the North, used by the South, and then left to rot once the war was over. Their poverty gave rise to all sorts of health issues, and the way they had been treated led to bitter and untrusting attitudes (Thompson). The stereotype of the poor, dumb, stubborn, and diseased Southerner has persisted through history. These views were especially strong when *Deliverance* was written and influenced Dickey's stance toward poor, rural Southerners.

The descriptions Dickey uses at the beginning of the novel give an early insight into his opinion of rural Southerners and introduce the otherness of the rural South. Dickey's first contrast between the urban and rural areas comes as the familiar "hamburger and beer drive-ins" pass by and the "strange tide of patent medicines and religious billboards" begins (37-38). As the scene of the novel gets further away from the city, the landscapes become more foreign and uneasy to the suburbanites. The city fades, and the strange and untamed "country of the nine-fingered people" opens, and Ed's feelings of familiarity and comfort with suburban civilization fade into apprehension and discomfort (Dickey 56).

Dickey discusses the way that rural Southerners should be perceived through the thoughts and actions of the main characters toward the rural people. The novel gives two important perspectives from which the rural people are viewed. The first perspective is through Ed's thoughts about and actions toward the rural Southerners he meets. Throughout the novel, Ed seems to find the rural dwellers to be strange, foreign, and at times repulsive. Upon first arriving at the small, "hookwormy" town of Oree, Ed is immediately filled with disgust. He looks at the town and thinks to himself, "Nobody worth a damn could ever come from such a place" (Dickey 55). He also meets an old man with trembling and spotted hands in the town and loathingly notes that every person he has ever met in the rural South has "always had something wrong with"

them and he “wanted none of it.” (Dickey 55-56). In contrast to Ed’s view, Lewis wants more of this rural way of life. Lewis sees all the problems with the country people and admires them instead of being disgusted. He points out that the country people do not have high regard for human life, are clannish, and many of them have been in prison, but he still says that they are good people. He describes them as “ignorant and full of superstition and bloodshed and murder and liquor and hookworm and ghosts and early deaths” and yet admires them and their way of life for what kind of people it creates (Dickey 49). Dickey utilizes Ed and Lewis’s viewpoints to present the rural South as either foreign, repulsive, and only worthy of rejection, or admirable and worthy of acceptance even with its faults.

As the novel progresses, Dickey begins to remove the sense of otherness from the rural South and bridge the gap between the urban and rural dwellers. This coming together as a common people is developed as Ed realizes he must kill the man that murdered Drew. Ed must descend to the level of the country people he despises to kill someone in order to survive. Ed rationalizes his need for murder through what the article, “Deliverance and the Aesthetics of Survival,” calls “an attitude of mind through which the act itself [killing] is divested of its conventional (ethical and affective) associations and made decent and therefore possible for him [Ed] (Glenday).” Ed’s rationalization of murder as a civilized and necessary thing coupled with the sense of “oneness” Ed begins to feel with the man finally brings the rural and urban South into one being, but this is short-lived. Once Ed kills the man, any togetherness is removed upon seeing the man’s dead body (Dickey 199).

Dickey uses the thoughts that Ed and Lewis have toward rural Southerners to introduce the idea that rural dwellers are to either be despised or admired. These ideas bring the question of which is right. Through Ed’s thoughts and character development, Dickey is saying that the

backward ideas of the rural South, which are embodied by the mountain men, should be rejected.

Deliverance gets close to reconciling the differences between Southerners but instead says that even though the rural and urban South have some commonality, they are not one.

Works Cited

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