James Dickey, All American Poet Essay, Research Paper

James Dickey was an American Poet whose life has been very diverse, and in his poetry that diversity is shown. He has a lifestyle that most poets do not get to experience. He has lived in many states and countries. That gives me the reason to think that his poetry resembles this life’s diversity.

James Lafayette Dickey, III was born in the town of Atlanta, Georgia on February 2, 1923. His parents were Maibelle and Eugene Dickey. He went to Ed S. Cook Elementary School and North Fulton High School as a kid, both of which are in Atlanta. He was athletic as a child. He played football and track, but his football career led him to a scholarship at the University of Clemson, in Clemson, South Carolina. But, before he went off to college he spent one year at the Darlington School in Rome, Georgia for one year in preparation for a college. He didn’t last longer than a year in Clemson though because he enlisted into the Army Air Corps.

He served in WWII as a flight radar observer and navigator. After serving in the army he went to school at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. He went there on the G. I. Bill. After graduating from Vanderbilt with a M. A. in English, he started to teach. He taught first at the Rice Institute in Houston, Texas. His time there was cut short because he was recalled to duty in Korea as flight training instructor. But as soon as he was discharged from the Corps he returned to teach again at Rice University. He taught at Rice until 1954 when he left to go to Europe on the Sewanee Review fellowship. After returning to the U.S. he joined the English Department at the University of Florida. He did not stay there long because he resigned after a dispute after he had read the poem, “The Father’s Body.”

He left Florida and made his way up to New York to work as an advertising copywriter. Not liking this job, he left it after only five years. He soon received another fellowship (Guggenheim Fellowship) which took him and his family to Europe. After returning from this fellowship he became Poet-in-Residence at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. He stayed there for only a year, when he then becomes Poet-in-Residence at San Fernando Valley State College, in Northbridge, California. He returned to teaching in 1965 at University of Wisconsin, in Milwaukee. He only taught there for a year because he becomes Poet-in-Residence at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He received a high honor that only a few poets get when he becomes Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress or Poet Laurate until 1968. He was then named Poet-in-Residence and First Carolina Professor of English, at the University of South Carolina, Columbia. He was then given the honor of the induction into the 50-member American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters on May 18th, 1988. He was assigned Chair #15, previously occupied by novelist John Steinbeck. In 1994 he was hospitalized with jaundice (yellowish pigmentation of the skin, tissues, and body fluids caused by the deposition of bile pigments). In 1996 he was afflicted with fibrosis of the lungs. In 1997 he taught his last class at USC January 14. He then died January 19, 1997. In his lifetime he had received 9 awards, and has received many honors ranging from graduating Magna Cum Laude at Vanderbilt all the way to being a Poet Laurate for the United States. James was married twice; his first wife was Maxine he meet while he was attending Vanderbilt University. Then his second wife Deborah Dodson he married after Maxine died. James has two sons and a daughter. He had wrote more than 20 books, some include; ‘Poems 1947-1967’ published in 1967, ‘The Zodiac’ (1976), and ‘The Whole Motion’ (1992).

James Dickey has many poems, and there is many different reasons behind them being made. There is over 2,000 poems to be exact. “He first started writing them though when he was writing love letters to his girlfriends from the war“ (qtd. InS \*censored\*ey newsletter). Then he asked his mother to send him volumes of poetry of both the classic poets and the contemporary poets while he was enlisted in the army, which could have lead him to such diverse poetry. He wrote while he was teaching, while he was in Europe on his Fellowships‘, while he worked as an advertising copywriter in New York, and during his many Poet-In-Residence stays at various colleges. The diversity of his poems is shown in many ways. One way is there names, two of which are named ‘The Lifeguard‘, and a poem called “To His Children in Darkness’. He has many poems with nature or animals in their names. Some of which are called ‘Horses and Prisoners’ and ‘Springer Mountain’. Plus he has many poems with similar names like ‘Fox Blood’ and ‘Listening to Foxhounds’. Both of which have to do with fox’s not only in their name but also in the poem itself.

His poetry has a lot to do with the different time periods of his life. For example, when he was in the war, I can think that he thought up such poems as ‘The Firebombing’, ‘Them, Crying’ and ‘Fence Wire’. There’s also poems like ‘Winter Trout’, ‘In the Mountain Tent’, and ‘The Birthday Dream’ all of which written during a happy time of his life, probably during his teaching at Rice or while he was a Poet-In-Residence at a college.

Most poets’ poetry shows their mood and how their life is going at that time when they write it. I believe that Dickey’s poetry shows this too. For example in the poem ‘The Driver’, I think he has just returned from World War II. In the poem he talks about how the war is now over and he can walk away, swimming and singing. Then he sinks into the sea to see the dead after the war and the emotionless faces looking at him. Then he realizes he is about to die and goes up to the surface, almost too late. Only, to see miles and miles of calm ocean. The war was no longer in his sight. This poem is about how he realizes that the war is over and he can go home to forget about the war. But when he tries he remembers the dead for one more time before he can have peace with himself.

I picked two poems of James Dickey’s to analyze, the first one is called ‘Sled Burial, Dream Ceremony’. This poem is about a dead Southerner that is being brought to the North for his burial. When he arrives on a train it is snowing. He is taken off the train by a group of men and women. The casket is open and one man sticks his hand inside and places the Southerner’s hand over his heart. They load him up on a sled drawn by horses. They pull him through town where they pass bushes, barns, and houses with kids looking out the window crying. They take him past some ice fishing houses and stop in the middle of a large frozen body of water. They cut out of the lake, a piece of ice as large as the casket. They place him in the water with the casket still open. A fish swims by as they are doing so. His casket floats for a little while like a ship bobbing in the water. Then it sinks to a watery grave. I do not understand why a Southerner would want to be buried in the North, and in the water with his casket open? Why doesn’t he want to be buried in the South, or at least in the ground? This poem is a dream according to the text before the poem in our textbook called Elements of Literature. Who though would dream that they were being buried in the north when they are from the South, in a body of water, and in an open casket? The last line of the poem it says, “On utter foreignness, before he fills and sails down.” (Anderson et al. 1112). I believe that he is trying to say that the small town didn’t know the southerner. He was a foreign man to them who they treated like they knew him and gave him a proper burial. The Southerner could have been originally from the North but moved to the South at a young age and lived there until he died. They travel with his casket open, could this have a meaning behind it saying that he wanted everybody to see him before he was buried and never seen again.

The next poem that I have chosen is called “Gamecock”. This poem is the life of a gamecock, or also called a fighting chicken. The poem starts off talking about how the actions of the cock. They are all based on fear, jealousy and murder when talking about his hens. There in no light in the chicken barn, as his legs are asleep. According to the poem he is in a crazed state of mind is like an “Old man in a terminal ward.“ (320). How he is crazy and different from every one else. There fore he is punished for his actions and treated differently then everyone else. He wakes up every day ready to crow his symbol to bring on that day. In the poem he is ready to protect all the female chickens, from another cock that could be in there house. He is ready to battle to the death for what he thinks is his. In this poem he uses ridicule, when he is talking about the old man in a terminal ward, and he also uses connotations. Some example of connotations are when he uses words like; enraged, sullenly, savagery, unappeased and terminal.

The life of James Dickey was very diverse and involved many different people. His poetry showed this diversity in many ways too. He has over 2,000 poems, all of which have different genres and different places they have came from. Some of which could have been from past jobs, and others could have been from his past places of residence. That is why he was a very popular poet for his time.