

Analysis of fallen angels by walter dean myers: pivotal moments

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As the novel *Fallen Angels* opens, the protagonist, a naive seventeen-year-old named Richard Perry, has recently enlisted in the army, a choice borne out of a lack of better options. Despite his less-than-stellar motivations for joining, Perry harbors high hopes for his life in the army; he is extremely idealistic, almost to the point of gullibility, believing exaggerated media portrayals of the army as a noble institution designed for the propagation of democratic values.

However, the longer he remains in his squad, the more his blind faith fades away, and it is eventually replaced with a more realistic, worldly take on the army and life in general. As the novel progresses, Perry's time in the army molds him into the person he will become, transforming him from a naive child to a mature man with a practical perspective on life. Throughout the story, there are a few crucial moments within the novel without which Perry's metamorphosis may never have come to pass; one is the death of his friend and mentor, Lieutenant Carrol, which causes Perry to discard his idealized image of war, and the other is his first kill, which forces him to accept the reality about himself and human nature. While Perry enters the Vietnam War believing that all soldiers are heroes and that dying defending his country would be a noble way to go, his perception soon changes following the death of his mentor. Lieutenant Carrol, the leader of Perry's company, is portrayed as a kind and sensitive man, a paragon of a soldier. In contrast the usual brutish, crude manner of high-ranking army officials, Carrol is a "gentle man" who encourages his troops rather than yelling at them, who guides them through the tough initial days of war, and who helps them cope with the psychological disturbances that are an inevitable component of their

situations; in essence, he is not only a mentor, but also a valuable friend (Myers 132).

He is intensely spiritual, referring to all recruits as “ angel warriors” because of their youth and innocence, since all of them are boys “ most [of whom] aren’t old enough to vote yet” (Myers 44). His warmth and passion foster within Perry a sense of peace about his situation, deluding him into believing that war is black-and-white and that every soldier plays an important role in serving his country. However, with Carrol’s death, both Perry’s tranquility and his status as an angel warrior are shattered as he comes to grips with the horrific reality of his situation and realizes that the romanticized media portrayal of war is an illusion, a mere smokescreen for the true abomination that lies under the surface; because of this revelation, he feels that a “ part of him died with [Lieutenant Carrol]” (Myers 136). The tragedy propels Perry towards maturity, and after it, he begins to “ become a different person” (Bishop). Rather than dying honorably for his country and his values, Carrol dies anonymously with others fighting for survival rather than ideals in a minor ambush that does not even constitute a battle; rather than being revered as a war hero, his sacrifice is forgotten and fades amidst the countless other sacrifices from innumerable soldiers that surrendered their lives in vain.

Slowly, Perry begins to realize that his mentor’s death is the rule, not the exception; he understands with ominous certainty that soldiers are men, not heroes, most of whom delude themselves into thinking they are fighting for some grandiose ideal while in actuality fight blindly for their survival only to

die at the hands of an enemy struggling for the same thing. With this realization, “ the lines of boyhood and manhood are as blurred as the borders between war and peace” as Perry sheds the innocence that earned him the designation of angel warrior and totters towards adulthood by coming to grips with the harsh reality of war; he is no longer the naive teenager who came to Vietnam (Murray). This is evident from the way he changes his perception of war as “ the place [he] was going to get away from all of the questions”, to the place where he winds up facing more than the questions he would have gotten from his peers: questions that threaten to tear the very fabric of his beliefs about what he previously had faith in as a noble institution; finally, he concludes that the army is a cold, unforgiving environment where nameless, multifarious soldiers sacrifice their lives and their legacies for naught (Myers 62). His reaction to this insight proves his maturing mentality; rather than breaking down, he faces the situation rationally, as a reasonable adult would do. In fact, he is even careful to preserve the myth for others, since he is aware of the devastating effects disillusionment can have on a person’s psyche; in his letter to Carrol’s wife, he assures her that her husband “ died bravely and honorably” defending his country, despite feeling all too acutely the terrible futility of his death (Myers 131). This action shows that the transformative effect war has had on him; he realizes that the divide between his mentality and the mindset of someone who has never witnessed the horrors he has is too great to be bridged, as shown when he says that his mother could never understand the person that he had become, because “ she had never been to Nam” (Myers 267).

After Carrol's death, Perry realizes that soldiers are mere men, not heroes; however, he still believes that war is black and white, that his side is clearly in the right, and that democratic ideas are worth propagating. This naive viewpoint is evident when he is shocked that the Vietnamese villagers the troops are attempting to pacify shrink away from his company in fear; after all, "we, the Americans, were the good guys" (Myers 119). This notion, however, changes dramatically when Perry makes his first direct kill out of combat: a young Vietcong soldier who would have shot Perry instantaneously had he a functioning rifle. It forces Perry to become conscious of the fact that Peewee's rationale for killing an enemy - "'cause he was gonna kill you ass if you didn't kill his" - is not reason enough for him to feel justified in his decision, and this prompts him to understand that, in the brief moment that he took action, he was not thinking of communism or democracy, but simply survival (Myers 190). After this life-altering incident, Perry begins to see the enemy in a new light; rather than viewing the Vietcong as a single faceless nemesis bent on spreading the evils of communism, he sees each soldier as an individual human, fighting, like him, simply to stay alive. He begins to understand that the previously well-defined line between "them" and "us" is blurred, and that perhaps his side, in the eyes of the Vietnamese, is just as evil as the Vietcong army is in the American perception.

As he describes it, war is composed of "hours of boredom, seconds of terror" and it is the seconds of terror in which a soldier makes a decision to either live at the expense of another or die that defines his nature as a man, rather than the hours of boredom in which he contemplates ideals that are

forgotten when confronted with the possibility of imminent death (Myers 152). In these seconds of terror, wherein ideals become mere meaningless words, what would otherwise be considered cold-blooded murder becomes logical – appealing, even – and that thought disturbs Perry; he begins to feel that, if the principles that he treasures do not matter in such a critical time, they may not matter at all. In fact, he starts to wonder if the basis of humanity is a lie and if, when it comes down to it, humans are simply animals destined to kill or be killed with utter disregard to beliefs or values; he emerges from his first kill with the knowledge that “ war changes humans...it sometimes even destroys their humanity” (Bishop). Ultimately, Perry becomes disillusioned with the essence of war, with democratic ideals, and even with himself; he understands that he is not special – even though he thought himself more virtuous than other soldiers, he, in his moment of terror, succumbed to his base instincts and chose to live by taking another’s life – but more likely one of the countless soldiers destined to die anonymously fighting for the most basic right of man: life. With this newfound insight, Perry completes his psychological transformation from the innocence of youth to the worldliness of maturity. Gone is the wide-eyed teenager who arrived at Vietnam trusting the army to process his medical profile; gone are the lofty ideals of the proliferation of democratic ideals.

His naivete is overwhelmed by a keen understanding of true army life: the harsh truth that, instead of grandiose principles or ideals, the army is about the gritty struggle for survival. This knowledge, while negatively affecting his perception of humanity, does not merely have an adverse effect on him; rather, it makes him realize how precious the gift of mundane, everyday life

is - he begins to cherish the small moments of normalcy he was deprived of in his life in the army. This appreciation for the ordinary forces him to reconcile with his mother, prompts him to convey his love to his brother, causes him to fully place his trust and his life in Peewee's hands, and, eventually, allows him to understand and accept himself.