

Robert W. Burns

**“More Frail and Mortal”: The
Wound of Fear in Philip Caputo’s *In
the Forest of the Laughing Elephant***

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid.

—D. H. Lawrence, “Snake”

hilip Caputo’s novella *In the Forest of the Laughing Elephant* illustrates the hero myth powerfully. The story is about a small group of soldiers in Vietnam led by Sgt. Lincoln Coombes and accompanied by a tribal hunting guide named Han, who go on a quest to recover the body of their mess sergeant who has been killed and dragged into the dark forest by a rogue tiger. The story has almost all of the elements of the traditional hero myth—a journey into a dark place, a guide and, most significantly, a hero who is both figuratively and literally wounded. While the wound motif figures prominently in the archetypal hero myth—most notably the myth of the Fisher King—Caputo’s wounded hero does not signify the potential for healing and redemption we find in the myth of the Grail King but instead more resembles the emasculation and despair of Hemingway’s Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*. Caputo’s hero is wounded, and finally destroyed, because of his own disturbing ideas of manhood and masculinity and his resultant denial of one of the basic experiences of being human: the ability to humble oneself before the beauty and power of the world of nature.

In an essay on Vietnam narratives, R. J. Fertel reminds us of the basic outline of Joseph Campbell’s monomyth: “The potential hero leaves a place of safety which, however, is desolate and in need of renewal. The hero then travels to a place of danger and darkness, down into hellish regions, or outward to landscapes peopled by demons and characterized by ashes and desiccation. Often aided by a guide of questionable nature, the hero in this dark place receives a wound... ”¹

Caputo's novella has been compared to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. Like these other texts, In the Forest develops characters of psychological and moral complexity, and invites an allegorical reading. Caputo himself described the story as an allegory in an interview entitled "A Rumor of War: A Conversation with Philip Caputo at 58":

The novella is... a story about America's—maybe even mankind's—relationship with the natural world. The desire in Sgt. Coombes is to conquer and overcome, whereas Han, the native guide, goes with the flow, so to speak, and survives. There's a point at which you submit, where you must submit to survive... you can be humble without being humiliated.²

We are told early in the narrative that Lincoln Coombes has "killed several men in hand-to-hand-combat; he'd strangled them or broken their necks or crushed their skulls with blows from a rifle butt."³ He symbolically smashes the wristwatches of his party of men before they enter the forest. He has "freed himself from caring" (259)—caring about time and death, and this indifference has seemingly given him "mastery over fear" (259). However, we learn early in the novel that Coombes has actually encountered the tiger the night it kills Angel Velasquez, the mess sergeant whose body Coombes is determined to retrieve. This is his secret, but the narrative voice tells us of the wound that Coombes is hiding, which explains his Ahab-like obsession with killing the tiger. "Never in his life had he seen a living thing so big and so obviously deadly; never in his life had he felt more frail and mortal" (290). This man who has crushed the bones of other men falls to the ground and loses control of his bowels when he is face to face with a being "capable of looking upon him as if he were an ant or a worm" (262). This is the figurative wound of fear that destroys Coombes' identity as a masculine, heroic figure. Coombes "loathed fear. He loathed its coppery taste, its fecal musk, its touch like the touch of bloodless fingertips" (291). Despite his seemingly heroic obsession with recovering the body of his sergeant, we see that his motives are, like those of many heroes in literature and life, not simply altruistic. The tiger has taken not only his mess sergeant but also his imagined version of himself as a fearless warrior. The tiger encounter also forces him to recall another traumatic incident that he suffered much earlier, during his first tour of duty in Vietnam:

He had only a week to go when he froze in the middle of a firefight. The first spattering of gunfire sent everyone in his patrol diving behind a rice-paddy dike. It wasn't heavy fire,

and the lieutenant stood and yelled, "Charge!" and all but Coombes got up and charged. He stayed behind the dike, curled up in a ball, he, Lincoln Coombes. (292)

Although he is a war hero who has won "two decorations for valor" (292), Caputo shows us that he is a man who is hiding his wounded courage in the persona of a warrior. In one passage, Coombes reminds his men of the warrior code: "Number one, we never leave our dead. That's our code. Number two, the tiger got Velasquez. That makes the tiger our enemy, and we are here—this is number three—to kill the enemy and bring Valesquez back, no matter what" (268).

But while Coombes does show some seemingly genuine sympathy for Valasquez—he corrects Han when Han refers to Valesquez as the tiger's "kill"—it is clear that his deeper motive has little to do with the warrior code. As Caputo stated in his interview in *WLA*, Coombes signifies the human urge, especially the male urge, to "conquer and overcome." Killing the tiger, Coombes believes, will restore his identity as a man. He is a man in some ways like Hemingway's Francis Macomber who feels "a cold, hollow fear"⁴ after running in panic from a charging lion he has wounded but not killed. "The fear was still there like a cold slimy hollow in all the emptiness where once his confidence had been and it made him feel sick" (129).

In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway writes about killing as an act that raises the killer to a "Godlike" level: "But when a man is still in rebellion against death he has pleasure in taking to himself one of the Godlike attributes; that of giving it. This is one of the most profound feelings in those men who enjoy killing."⁵ Interestingly, when one of his men asks him why he smashed their watches before entering the Forest of the Laughing Elephant, Sgt. Coombes replies, "Don't interrupt Jesus in the middle of a parable. . . ." (288). In Lincoln Coombes' disturbing notion of male identity, he is either "an ant or a worm" or he is a God. His inability to accept that he is only a man, his refusal to humble himself before the natural world, and his disingenuous allegiance to a military code of "leaving no man left behind" all conspire to doom him.

Fertel writes of "the many traumas Vietnam will present the young man" but asserts that

[I]t is the traumatic death of this idealized vision of the hero that must first be undergone... They must abandon what lies at the heart of the John Wayne myth, the myth of competence: that we can achieve our goals through our efforts alone... In sum, the hero's first task is not, as he expects, to

don the accoutrements and pride of greatness, but rather to take on the ashes of humility. Only then can true greatness come, a greatness far beyond John Wayne and America's hollow vision of heroism. (2)

The creature Han refers to simply as "Tiger" is not just a primal forest carnivore. Like William Blake's "Tyger" who burns "brightly in the forest of the night"⁶ this tiger is beyond the world of soldiers and hunters, beyond the world of time that Coombes only imagines he has overcome by sheer will. Coombes continues to think in "facts" despite his unconventional utterances and behavior:

He hoped that facts would help dispel the mythic power of the awesome phantom that now stalked his memory with eyes glowing like the eyes in a jack-o'-lantern, only they were green instead of orange. He could see them still, as he'd seen them the night before, burning with no expression in them except serenity. (263)

The need to destroy what one fears is certainly a major theme in this story, and it is this urge that identifies the traditional male hero's archaic ideas of the heroic. Coombes does not understand that submission and humility—even submission to fear—are qualities that are heroic. Instead, he accepts the absurd and self-destructing notion that one must impose one's will on the world in order to overcome one's fear of it.

Like Coombes, Han experiences fear: "It was good to be hunting Tiger again but Tiger puzzled him, and because it did, it also frightened him..." (276). Han, however, experiences fear with the humility that Caputo recognizes as the mark of an authentic hero, and his humility allows him to respect the tiger and to speak of it with reverence—a reverence that is evident in the novel's final transcendent scene where Han and one of Coombes' men, Teepee, finally encounter the tiger they have been hunting, as it pauses to drink from a pool:

With its forelegs bent as it drank, it looked as wide across the shoulders as Han was tall, the muscles defined with the sharpness of an anatomical drawing, and then its back arching toward its raised haunches, its spine hugged by two symmetrical ridges of muscle, each the thickness of a strong man's legs and twice the length—all in all, an assembly of power that was truly breathtaking: And yet it was its beauty

that captured and mesmerized him. The white whiskers, the white patches around the eyes, the texture of the fiery coat, the clean articulation of its stripes, bolting across its back. His first thought was: It can kill me, his second was amazed: My God, it's beautiful.... And so he dropped his gaze and bowed and walked slowly backward alongside Han, the tiger following them, never closing or widening the distance between them; and it came to him that they looked like two subjects leaving the presence of an emperor, humbled yet not humiliated in their acknowledgement of his sovereignty. (352)

After this encounter, both men sit with their hearts pounding “allowing their terror to dissipate,” and Teepee says “Wasn't that something, Han? Weren't we lucky to see him like that? Up so close? Man, wasn't that just something?” (353) Although Teepee and Han experience fear in the presence of the tiger, they are not destroyed by their fear, as Coombes is. Coombes also has a final encounter with the tiger as it comes to drink from a pool, but his response is both fearful and fatal. While shooting poison tipped arrows at the tiger, he stumbles and wounds himself with one of the arrows in his belt quiver and dies as he runs from the tiger in terror.

“Weren't we lucky?” This is the gracious insight of the true hero, the sensibility that is able to experience awe that the John Wayne hero, the conventional hero usually does not—gratitude for a moment that is both terrifying and exhilarating. It is not simply the gratitude that one has after surviving an experience that might have been fatal. It is the gratitude of being moved by beauty and mystery. Joseph Campbell referred to this as “the rapture of being alive.”⁷ Anyone who has had this kind of rapturous moment will attest that the self, while exhilarated and often ecstatic, is also curiously insignificant in these moments when the petty things fall away and the real things emerge. While weakness and insignificance do not seem to be terms one would normally associate with the heroic, they are almost always qualities associated with the hero's quest. It reminds one of the moment that D.H. Lawrence recounts in one of his finest poems, “Snake.” In this poem where Lawrence encounters a venomous snake drinking from a pool in Sicily and, in obedience to the “voices of [his] accursed human education” hurls a log at it in fear, we see a sensibility that echoes the conclusion of Caputo's novella: “Was it cowardice, that I dared not kill him?/Was it humility, to feel so honoured?”⁸

Caputo addresses this hero theme in ways very similar to Lawrence in “The Ghosts of Tsavo: Stalking the Mystery Lions of East Africa”:

For me there were two moments that stuck in my mind. One was when we were on foot and had smelled a fairly recent kill in this thick scrub, and there were lion tracks around. When you're in a situation like that and you're not armed, you experience something of the awe that I think we're supposed to experience in the presence of the divine. You really do sense your own weakness and your own insignificance in a way that you don't in the relatively tame woods that exist in most of North America. Something comes over you when you're in these areas that are dominated by big predators that takes you back to mankind's primitive beginnings, when animals like that were almost deified.⁹

One cannot help but conclude that this world would be less dark and tortured if there were more of us who could bow in awe before the sanctity of other beings and, in that adoration, deepen and ennoble our own consciousness.

Notes

1. R. J. Fertel. "Vietnam Narratives and the Myth of the Hero." *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, 12.1, 2.
2. Philip Caputo. "A Rumor of War: A Conversation with Philip Caputo at 58." *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, 12.1, 2.
3. Philip Caputo. "In the Forest of the Laughing Elephant." *Exiles: Three Short Novels*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 258.
4. Ernest Hemingway. "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." *The Snows of Kilimanjaro and Other Stories*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 129.
5. John Killinger. *Hemingway and the Dead Gods: A Study in Existentialism*. (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1960), 30.
6. William Blake. "The Tiger." *Selected Poems*. Ed. Stanley Gardner. (London: University of London Press, 1962), 125.
7. Joseph Campbell. "Myth and the Modern World." *The Power of Myth*. Ed. Betty Sue Flowers. (New York: Doubleday, 1988.), 3-35.
8. D. H. Lawrence. "Snake." *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*. (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 351.
9. Philip Caputo. "Ghosts of Tsavo: Tracking the Mythic Lions of East Africa." (*National Geographic*), 2.

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