MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY

Jackson Purchase Historical Society

Volume 1 | Number 1 Article 10

6-1973

Review: William Faulkner, Horsetrader

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs

Part of the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
(1973) "Review: William Faulkner, Horsetrader," *Jackson Purchase Historical Society*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/jphs/vol1/iss1/10

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Murray State's Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jackson Purchase Historical Society by an authorized editor of Murray State's Digital Commons. For more information, please contact msu.digitalcommons@murraystate.edu.

William Faulkner: Horsetrader

No one has proved that William Faulkner read Augustus Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes,* Joseph Baldwin's *Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi,* or George Washington Harris' *Sut Lovingood.* However, it is my purpose to suggest that the horsetrading motifs in Faulkner's novel, *The Hamlet,* are similar to those in the above works of Southwestern humor. In order to effect its purpose, this study will first attempt to define Southwestern humor and consider some of the techniques and practitioners of this peculiarly American form of humor.

According to Bernard DeVoto, Southwestern Humor "is the frontier examining itself, recording itself, and entertaining itself."[1] DeVoto defines the purposes of this form of humor as the embodiment of character, the revelation of a point, and the entertainment of listeners.

Following Franklin Meine's convention, scholars have adopted the term, "Tall Tale,"[2] to describe the frontier anecdote, a narrative whose length was generally determined by the amount of odd space to be filled in a newspaper of the American Southwest a century to 140 years ago. Generally based on the workaday happenings immediately at hand, this humor strove through realistic depiction of character to produce its laughter. As opposed to the ornate and sticky sentimentality of sketches and stories being produced then by local colorists like Bret Harte and Thomas Nelson Page, the frontier anecdote as recorded by Southwestern humorists seems to be our most reliable catalogue of what life was like on the outskirts of civilization. As DeVoto concludes, "the newspaper humor of the South and Southwest . . . was the first vigorous realism in American literature."[3]

Constance Rourke regionalizes such humor to an area spreading "from Kentucky and Tennessee in a broad encirclement through Georgia and the Gulf States to Texas and Arkansas reaching beyond the Mississippi."[4] She describes its characters and their milieu as

> Scalawags, gamblers, ne'er-do-wells, small rapscallions, or mere cornerackers . . . drawn into a careless net of stories against a background of pine barrens, sandy wastes, half-ploughed fields, huts with leaky roofs. . . They belonged to a rootless drift that had followed in the wake of huntsman and scout . . . sly instead of strong. . . Their adventure had to do with vast practical jokes, pranks played on ministers and camp meetings and on settled respectable people generally . . .[5]

Southwestern humor grossly exaggerates qualities which made man's triumph over adversity possible: endurance, brutality, shrewdness, trickiness, speed, and strength. Ridiculed as handicaps to survival in a new land are sentimentality, stupidity, regret, thoughtfulness, and respectability.

Longstreet admits that such a Southewestern droll as Ned Brace chooses persons as ripe for ridicule as "The beau in the presence of his mistress, the fop, the pedant, the purse-proud, the overfastidious, and sensitive."[6] The preposterous situation comedy afforded by such tales is made almost credible by the humanity of the comic hero, the story's realistic setting, and the deadpan delivery of detail by or about its rustic. This boor has been called "a type of the Natural Man, inherently superior to civilized decadence, his egalitarian good fellowship not quite disguised by his shaggy exterior and helliferocious manner of speech."[7]

An aristocrat whose varied career spanned the first eighty years of our nation, Longstreet rose from a school of Middle Georgia writers including Baldwin, Joel Chandler Harris, Lanier, and Francis Tickner, "who looked out of their eyes and

listened with their ears, and took frank interest in things for their own sake, and had enduring astonishment at the most common."[8] Writing in the journalistic tradition of the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, and *Salmagundi* papers, Longstreet shrewdly observes human nature in sketches he minimizes as "nothing more than fanciful combinations of real incidents and characters. . . which would otherwise be dull and inspid except for his inclusion of some personal incident of my own, real or imaginary."[9] Editor-minister-college president Longstreet reminds his reader that if at times his language grows "coarse, inelegant and sometimes ungrammatical, it is language accommodated to the capacity of the person (of) whom he represents of himself speaking."[10]

Edgar Allan Poe's *Southern Literary Messenger* regularly cudgeled mediocre writers breaking into print, but in March, 1836, he heralded *Georgia Scenes* as a faithful account of "the manners of our Southwestern peasantry showing a penetrating understanding of Southern character in particular a sure ome of better days for the literature of the South."[11] Poe picked "The Horse-Swap" as one of the best tales in the book.

B.R. McElderry, Jr., in a 1957 preface, gives as one important reason for his republication of *Georgia Scenes* the relevance of the book

> to William Faulkner. Again it is not certain that Faulkner ever read the book, but as President of the University (of Mississippi), Longstreet lived for several years at Oxford. . . Moreover, the humor of the book is the kind that preserves itself in oral tradition. Both the fantasy and the violence of Faulkner's humor are more understandable in the light of the frontier attitude which Longstreet records.[12]

If Longstreet's characters are born out of the comic predicaments he creates for them, Baldwin's situation comedy grows out of the characters themselves, much as does Faulkner's. Like sewing machine salesman Ratliff, Ovid Bolis, Esq., lies "from his greatness of soul and his comprehensiveness of mind. The truth was too small for him." His inbred hyperbole makes all ideas facts to him.[13]

Lawyer and one-time state supreme court justice Baldwin's approach to humor is considerably more dignified than that of either Longstreet or Harris. An analysis of Baldwin's tone shows it to be kind, sympathetic, and even though comic, true.[14]

George Washington Harris, Knoxville, Tennessee, lawyer and steamboat captain, represents in *Sut Lovingood* a living compendium of Jacksonian democracy. Sut willingly demonstrates how superior the bestiality, glory, and humor of the primitive are compared to the straightjacket of culture. Yet, one critic concludes, "out of the seeming chaos and meanness of Sut's personality and actions there gradually arises a superstructure revealing that a morality and a philosophy have been in existence always, that they contain, ironically enough, numerous traditional and wholesome values."[15] Although Ratliff's humanism is not so coarsely encrusted as Sut's, the reader recognizes kindred spirits in these two news-mongering, mischief-loving raconteurs, each with his "air of perpetual bachelorhood."[16]

Brom Weber draws a comparison, further, between "those major artists who resemble Harris -- Thomas, Wolfe, Erskine, Caldwell, and William Faulkner, Southerners all -- because the American frontier tradition is ineradicable. It is more subtly comprehended in Faulkner's violence and to a limited extent in humor in various forms grotesque and ironic in Faulkner --written in common tongue."[17]

Although they are by no means identical, this writer has found in comparing Longstreet's "The Horse-Swap" and Baldwin's "An Equitable Set-Off" with the

Snopes-Stamper horse trades, these five motifs in each of the three tales: the similarities about the traders' motives, the nature of the animals for trade, the nature of the deceptions, the similarities of the return matches, and the public disclosures of the deceptions.

The pair of bargainers in each story swaps horses not so much for profit as for pleasure. Each horseswapper lives to prove his superiority as a bargainer, preferring to risk loss rather than forego the pleasure of trading.

Ab Snopes, contending that he trades for honor, not profit, resents trades like the one begun by Stamper because the useless horse involved has commanded "boot," or money above the intrinsic worth of an animal, before it eventually plays into the hands of Snopes. Ab then sets out to "unload Beasley Kemp's horse back onto Pat Stamper to recover that eight dollars worth of the pride and honor of Yoknapatawpha County horsetrading."[18]

Stamper, too, plays "horses against horses as a gambler plays cards against cards, for the pleasure of beating a worthy opponent as much as for gain."[19]

Both Yallow Blossom and Peter Ketch carry out "The Horse-Swap" as a sport of skill, neither willing to be backed out of a trade, surrounded as they are by kibitzers. "I'd rather lose ten dollars anytime than not make a trade,"[20] Blossom admits. The idea is to prove, as he says, "I'm perhaps a leetle, jist a leetle, of the best man at a horse-swap."[21]

Ketch is equally keen for a trade: "I told you," said Peter, "I'd be as clever as you; therefore, here goes two dollars more, just for trade sake."[22]

Baldwin's inverterate horsetrader, Theophilus Smith, trying his wits and failing in a trade with Hickerson, seeks, in righting his situation, only what he has lost to Hickerson.

The animals for trade seem always to be either two equally faulty plugs or just an average horse or mule being bartered for a draft hack on his last legs.

Snopes offers a team comprising an ordinary mule and a horse, which, standing alongside anything on four legs, looks bad. Stamper counters with two mismatched, rabbity mules, not worth their weight in lye soap.

Blossom's "Bullet" sports a saddle sore six inches long while Ketch's horse, Kit, not to be outdone, is not only blind but deaf as well.

Smith swaps a fairly sound horse for Hickerson's sorrel, which has "all the diseases that horseflesh is heir to and some it gets by adoption."[23]

Central to all three horse trades is the deception motif.

In *The Hamlet* Ab tars wire cuts in the chest of his horse, simulates sprightliness by saltpetering the beast's gums and worming a large fishhook under the skin of the horse's back, where only a flick of the checkrein can make the beast a snorting stallion. The half-dead horse is lathered into a sweat which gives gridiron ribs and grubby coat the svelte sheen of a darkblood bay.

Stamper's so-called "matched" mules have been injected with "just exactly to the inch of whatever it was to get them to town and off the square before it played out."[24]

Blossom has his saddle blanket adjusted to cover Bullet's six-inch sore, which, with a rider's weight acting as irritant, keeps the animal perpetually bowing and cavorting. This strained animation distracts from the horse's ugly head, cropped ears, fretted ribs, and sagging haunches.

More insidiously, Ketch is deceiving Bullet's owner with his horse Kit, whose boasted obliviousness to distractions is only the final stages of blindness and deafness.

In Baldwin's horseswap, Smith, after a judicious wait, "fixes up" the sorrel Hickerson has unloaded on him, deputizing Timothy Diggs in the meantime to undermine Hickerson's faith in a fine mule newly acquired by that horse-swapper. Diggs' model of understatement reminds the reader of Ratliff's artful association of Ab Snopes with barnburning: "I don't know as I would go on record as saying he set ere a one of them affire. I would put it that they both taken fire while he was more or less associated with them."[25]

Diggs' deadpan reply to Hickerson's "was anything the matter with the mule?" is "I don't know myself that there was much, only this; that the mule does very well except in the full of the moon, and then he takes fits which last about a week, hardly ever longer."[26]

Sut Lovingood is equally adept at cloaking the extravagant in understatement. Of a hound run down by a rampaging horse, he says, "she were stretched out in runnin shape; not hurt a bit, only her neck was broke and a spinnin wheel spoke a-stickin atween her ribs a foot or so deep."[27]

Longstreet does not re-match his traders, but both the Faulkner and Baldwin tales do. In *The Hamlet* the duped is again outwitted, this time with the very horseflesh he had thought to have dumped back on Stamper. Deception is again put in play as Stamper's Negro cosmetologist transforms the nag into a sleek "little dark brown horse fat and tight as a drum."[28] Impossibly inflated with a bicycle tire valve under its skin, Ab's erstwhile bay is something "the beast's own dam would not recognize, let alone its recent owner."[29]

In *Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*, the return match's outcome is a reversal of the first trade's result: the duped returns in kind the treatment Hickerson has dealt him; Hickerson, naively believing that Diggs has once only narrowly missed being swindled in a trade for the mule Hickerson now owns, swallows Diggs' lies about the mule's "fits." Hickerson quickly "fixes up" this actually sound animal and trades it even-swap for his former liability, the sagging sorrel Smith has now glamorized beyond Hickerson's recognition.

Finally, the element of public disclosure is evident in all three transactions. Open admission, or even boasting, about the chicanery he has used is felt obligatory by the victor, still feeling "perhaps a leetle, jist a leetle of the best man at a horse-swap."[30] But as the comic capstone to the story, the braggart learns in both the Longstreet and the Baldwin tale that he too has been made an ass.

Pat Stamper admits he has "skinned" Snopes in the first trade and intimates he is not above repeating the feat in a second swap. Complaining about the poor prospect he is forced to trade for in order to recover his mule, Snopes whines, "It won't even get me home. "To which Stamper replies, "That's what I think myself. That's why I want to get shut of it."[31]

Peter Ketch's discovery that Bullet's saddle blanket hides a six-inch sore affords the arm-chair horsetraders a hearty belly laugh until son Neddy apprises them of the true situation: "His back's mighty bad off; but dod drot my soul if he's put it to daddy as bad as he thinks he has, for old Kit's both blind and deef!"[32]

Not long after their second trade, Hickerson, in the presence of Smith and assorted horse fanciers, is gloating over what he is sure has been his second fooling of Smith. Sagely, Smith waits for the last guffaw to die. Then he makes it public knowledge that Hickerson has been beaten at his own game, camouflaging and trading a sound mule for an animal so worthless Hickerson himself has palmed it off earlier on Smith.

Harris' *Sut Lovingood* has no specific horsetrade but does make a number of references to the wiles of the trade. The sore-back motif of *The Hamlet* and "The Horse-Swap" is more than once alluded to by Harris: one of Sut's earthy similes describes the effects of a moustache upon a kiss as making "(the kiss) taste and smell like a mildewed saddle-blanket after it had been rid on a sore-back hoss three hundred miles in August."[33]

Lovingood sits "Tearpoke, as a nick-tailed, bow-necked, long, poor, pale sorrell"[34] which could have been traded from Snopes, Stamper, Blossom, Ketch or Hickerson. Tearpoke belongs to the order of the "nick-tailed," to which Bullet and most of the other horses and mules of this study belong, valuable no longer as anything other than the limping vehicles through which a game of wits can be played.

Other writers have noted Faulkner's home-spun hyperbole and have suggested his probable debt to the Southwestern humorists: "It is a sort of homely and sober-sided frontier humor that is seldom achieved in contemporary writing. The horse-trading episodes in *The Hamlet* . . . might have been inspired by the Davy Crockett almanacs in the tradition of frontier humor and realism, beginning with Augustus Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*."[35]

Professor A.P. Hudson speaks of Longstreet and other early Southwestern humorists as a leavening influence upon American writing to follow: "They had the wit to realize that something old in talk might look new in print." B.R. McElderry, who quotes Hudson, contends the Professor's statement is applicable to a great deal of the genuine talent in American literature from Longstreet to the present. "It goes far to explain," he concludes, "the achievements of such diverse authors as Twain, Sinclair Lewis, Hemingway, and Faulkner."[36]

Robert Penn Warren agrees that it is the tradition of frontier humor which is the source of the most important strain of humor in Faulkner's work, but he suggests that the writer probably "got it from the proches of country stores and the courthouse yards of county seats and not from any book."[37] It can be assumed, then, that Warren rules out *Georgia Scenes, Flush Times Of Alabama and Mississippi,* and *Sut Lovingood* as possible secondary sources for *The Hamlet,* except as oral distortions Faulkner may have absorbed unawares.

A comparison of Faulkner's humor with that of his Southwestern predecessors is helpful, however, in better understanding the regional laboratory in which most of his work has its origin.

Finally, it must be said that Faulkner is not a humorist, *per se,* in the sense that Twain or George Washington Harris is. Faulkner's use of humor is sporadic and more like the use to which Shakespeare puts humor in a serious play: for purposes of contrast and effect in intensifying a scene's mood. As Robert Penn Warren concludes "Humor in Faulkner's work is never exploited for its own sake. It is regularly used as an index, as a lead, to other effects. The humor may be striking, but his humor is but one perspective on the material and it is never a final perspective."[38]