

The Humor of William Faulkner

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Comedy or humor is an important aspect of Faulkner's work, but the comic has many different functions in his fiction. The author of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* is also a very humorous writer, and I want to show this by discussing some of his most comic works, and by quoting briefly from selected passages from stories and novels. Despite the emphasis on Faulkner's humor, it may be useful to begin from a different point of departure.

Doom and destiny, fate and fatality, stubbornness and endurance, the ageless struggle with the forces inside and outside of man, man's reluctance to change with an everchanging world, – all these are key-words in any description of William Faulkner and his works. His writing portrays the decline and fall of an old system, the values and beliefs of which are forgotten or lost, and life seems to become cheap. The outrage of what in younger years may have been a potential believer, in individual man as well as in mankind, becomes replaced by a more mature acceptance of the limitlessness of man's stupidity, gullibility, hypocrisy; but also his good-will, his capacity for endurance and for grief. As a totality Faulkner's work shows a deeply-felt and strongly expressed understanding of man in motion, of a totality of experience; the insight that life can't be divided neatly into tragic or comic, good or bad, black or white, but that one has to accept all the unresolved tensions, live at a crossroads never really knowing where to go or why.

What all this amounts to is that Faulkner is a writer of the most serious kind, not only because he took his art and craft seriously, but, as every Faulkner reader knows, because he wrote of matters dark and morbid and forbidding: death and decay, darkness and, yes, doom. The broader acceptance of the ways of the world that one may detect in the aging author, the post-Nobel Prize Faulkner, indicates perhaps that we had better look for Faulkner the humorist in his late writings, and not in those of his major years which produced such books as *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Sanctuary*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and others.

This leads me to one of the career fallacies in Faulkner scholarship, which I have already touched upon: an understanding of the development

in his overall career from extreme pessimism to a limited optimism, or, as one critic has described it, from "destructive despair" in the 1930s to a "nearly positive criticism of life" in later works.¹ With this understanding goes the argument that humor can hardly be found in Faulkner before *The Hamlet*, and that it becomes more and more poignant and occupies more and more space in his books till it finally dominates his last novel, *The Reivers*. I do not doubt that Faulkner's "Weltanschauung" changed gradually over the years, and that the outrage of the potential believer in the years when he made his most splendid failures really was replaced by a much deeper understanding of man's multiple capacities and of man's place and role in society. Yet I call this a career fallacy, a misjudgment, if or when this understanding leads to the conclusion that the comic in Faulkner's writing belongs to later years alone. Actually, Faulkner wrote his most hilariously funny stories at the same time as he finished the major and not so funny novels, he wrote witty and pointed sketches from the very start, he included tall tales in many a short story before 1930, he exaggerated wildly, used inversion of roles or practices for comic purpose, invested wit and cunning in the presumed lower races, and even in the purported weaker sex, used different levels of styles e.g. in direct speech so as to juxtapose them and make fun of one or the other, dependent on the perspective; and many of his backwoods people are comic characters if they are not plainly grotesque.

In the works of Faulkner there is, from beginning to end, almost invariably an attempt at a total understanding that includes the tragic as well as the comic, a style that spans most levels of expression, an imagery full of contrasts and antithetical structures, extended metaphors and similes that try to encompass everything that can possibly add to the description of a scene or the telling of a story. In short, humor is found everywhere in Faulkner's work, to varying degrees of course, and with the possible exception of the novel *Pylon*. It is important to be aware that Faulkner never, except for a few very marginal cases in short stories, exploited the comic for its own sake: it must always be seen and interpreted as an integral part of the context in which it is found. Before discussing what kind of humor Faulkner relies on, let me also emphasize that his free use of humor as central or more hidden parts of his narratives was inevitable. Relying on his own experience and the tradition he was a part of, his heritage was also the abundant riches of Southwestern humor. Using his own region and his own local or rural people, the very speech and behavior of these people would in itself function as a comic element. Research has shown that Faulkner definitely made use of the great storytellers of the Southwestern tradition, but the motifs and episodes he found there are transformed in his writing so that instead of being anecdotal or episodic, they become parts of the larger epic struc-

ture of the work as a whole and often support or broaden the themes of such a work.'

In a classification of the functions of comedy in Faulkner's work, the most obvious influence comes from the Southern or Southwestern tradition, and is represented by the tall tale. It is not frequently used by Faulkner, yet it is typical of a well-known aspect of his writing in general: the tendency to exaggerate and hence to distort reality out of most if not all proportions. We may term this hyperbolic humor, and examples of it can be found in an early story such as "The Liar", - in many ways Faulkner's first rural Yoknapatawpha story, belonging to the New Orleans period, in "Idyll in the Desert" which until the publication of *Uncollected Stories* was virtually unknown outside a small group of scholars, and, as Hans Bungert has shown convincingly, in the "Al Jackson" correspondence between Sherwood Anderson and Faulkner which, through numerous reworkings, became a part of Faulkner's second novel, *Mosquitoes*.³ Faulkner's first Al Jackson letter to Sherwood Anderson provides a good example of this kind of humor. Al Jackson had the brilliant idea of raising sheep in a swamp,

. . . his belief being that wool grew like anything else, and if sheep stood in water all the time, like trees, the fleece would be naturally more luxuriant. By the time he had about a dozen of them drowned, he made life belts out of cane for them. And then he found that the alligators were getting them.

One of the older boys (he must have had about a dozen) discovered the alligators wouldn't bother a goat with long horns, so the old man carved imitation horns about three feet across out of roots and fastened them onto his sheep. He didn't give them all horns, lest the alligators catch onto the trick.⁴

The sheep unfortunately turn into water animals, lose their legs, develop scales, and appear to become alligator-like soon. Accordingly, one of the sons, Claude, is sent in to catch as many sheep/alligators as possible:

Soon he could stay under water for a half an hour at a time; but out of the water his breathing wasn't so very good, and his legs were beginning to feel funny at the knee. He then took to staying in the water all day and all night and his folks would bring him food. He lost all use of his arms to the elbow and his legs to the knee; and the last time any of the family saw him his eyes had moved around to the side of his head and there was a fish's tail sticking out of the corner of his mouth.

About a year later they heard of him again. There was a single shark that appeared off the coast that kept on bothering the blonde lady bathers, especially the fat ones.

"That's Claude," said old man Jackson, "he always was hell on blondes."⁵

Although perhaps not so much of a tall tail in itself, the yarn spinning and the pleasure taken in the very telling of stories such as "Fool About a Horse" and "Spotted Horses", clearly shows Faulkner's indebtedness to the great and living tradition of the Southwestern tall tale. One may also think of the selling, stealing, reselling and re-stealing of mules in *The Unvanquished* to see how Faulkner elaborates on a well-known formula, creating comic effects and even relief because the poor struggling Southerners defeat an enemy that should not be where it is. These examples also show how Faulkner from the borrowed formula through the short story versions to the final novel reduced the tallness of the tale, increased the still weak plausibility, yet kept something of the fantastic and fabulous, the almost magic power of a story also when it appears in the context of otherwise realistic descriptions of everyday life.

Faulkner's humor is, then, very often hyperbolic, but so is much in his writing in general, and this is reflected in his very style. The wild exaggerations, the ironic or sarcastic remark, the scheming and planning of many a character who should know himself better than that, can very often be seen as resulting from the choice of narrator in a particular story. Some of them are notorious liars, totally unreliable, and when they spin their yarns in what appears to be the original oral story-telling situation: a teller, a tale, chewing and spitting listeners, anything can be expected, anything can happen. If the narrator is the itinerant sewing machine agent, Ratliff, the story has probably some relation to reality or truth. But the comic elements, the exaggerations, the free fabrication, are always given a function in relation to more serious business. Ratliff very often tells his stories to watch the reactions, to get something going to come closer to the truth somehow, or, if truth seems too pretentious, he may use his fictional truth to reach a justice that could not otherwise be achieved. Faulkner's comic tales, in short stories and novels, in which the humorous elements become dominant, almost invariably deal with bargains and deceptions; with cunning and scheming for personal gains such as money, revenge, power, control. But even though Flem Snopes and the qualities known as "Snopesism" are the common denominator of all the stories that went into *The Hamlet* in revised form, one should not overlook the fact that "Spotted Horses", in magazine or book version, is one of the funniest and one of the best comic stories written in the English language.

As mentioned above, some of the comic effects may in part be explained by reference to the narrator. If he is a backwoods character, slow, low, and smart enough to outsmart himself, speaking in the vernacular of the region, some comedy is inevitable. But comedy does not have to be linked to a comic or grotesque character-narrator, and this can easily be seen in *The Hamlet* where the I-narrator Ratliff of the short story is replaced by omniscient narration in the book version of

"Spotted Horses". If we take a closer look at the narrators in Faulkner's comic stories, two main categories are detectable. First, there is the group of oral story tellers, backwoods people, whiskey distillers, lazy bums, good-for-nothings, travelling salesmen, liars, observers, but also natural story-tellers – poets in their own right. The second group includes stories in which comic relief is sought because the stories are often pathetic if not tragic; they present narrator-characters whom we pity: children or young people who, when telling the story, or when experiencing the adventures in the story, do not understand what it is all about. The child-narrator gives a perspective on the events that very often yields comic effects, if only as a result of the limited perspective. Read stories such as "Uncle Willy", "Two Soldiers", "Shingles for the Lord", "My Grandmother Millard and General Bedford Forrest and the Battle of Harrykin Creek," and it becomes very clear that Faulkner's humor has important structural and thematic functions in his texts and is not there because of its being funny and entertaining. Even *The Town*, sequel to *The Hamlet*, has such a child-narrator in parts, and according to the author he did this deliberately because he thought it might be more amusing with "the innocence of a child who knew what he was seeing but had no particular judgments about it". The double perspective – child-narrator and grown-up or old commentator who understands now what he did not grasp then – is a common device in Faulkner, but does not have to create comic effects. It does not become very funny when Quentin Compson thinks back in "A Justice", for instance. Remembrance of things past, in a golden youth, is nonetheless often filled with wonder and with humor, as *The Reivers* is Faulkner's ultimate proof of. Fun of all sorts combines with reflections and comments, when Lucius Priest tells about himself as an 11-year-old half a century later, for instance as seen in this description of how a poor farmer has secured himself a new income through a strange kind of crop in the new age of motorcars on their way to Memphis. Our company has just given up trying to get through a mud hole in the dirt road:

"We might a got through this time too if you folks didn't raise such heavy mud up here."

"Don't hold that against us," the man said. "Mud's one of our best crops up thisaway."

"At two dollars a mudhole, it ought to be your best," Ned said.⁶

Out of the mudhole our company wants to unhook the mules:

"Not yet," the man said. "There's another hole just this side of the bridge that I'm throwing in for free. You ain't been acquainted here for a year now. . . . What we call the reserve patch up thisaway."⁷

The very number of texts and titles mentioned so far should indicate how pervasive an element in Faulkner's work humor really is. It should also have been made fairly clear that his humor has thematic and structural functions, on various levels and to various degrees from book to book, from story to story. The Hamlet, despite its Snopesism and its criticism of the modern and cheap ways of the world, is comedy, of all sorts, and the polyphonic technique of its narration makes it clear that one type of comedy, one voice, one character, should not be taken as more important, serious, comic, than the others.

Examples of Faulkner's use of comic effects in The Hamlet can be found in the description of the reactions of the members of the Varner family when Eula has become pregnant:

"Hold him till I get a stick of stove wood," she gasped. "I'll fix him. I'll fix both of them. Turning up pregnant and yelling and cursing here in the house when I am trying to take a nap!"⁸

Old man Varner, Will, is smarter than his wife and son, and has no plans of revenge or punishment:

"You mean you aint going to do nothing?" Jody said. "Not anything?"
"Do what?" Varner said. "To who? Dont you know them damn tomcats are halfway to Texas now? Where would you be about now, if it was you? . . ." . . . "Now you go on out to the barn and set down until you cool off. Make Sam dig you some worms and go fishing. If this family needs any head-holding-up done, I'll tend to it myself." . . . "Hell and damnation, all this hullabaloo and uproar because one confounded running bitch finally foxed herself. What did you expect – that she would spend the rest of her life just running water through it?"⁹

Comedy is also at the core of *The Reivers*, as we have seen, while a more contrapuntal comedy, in which parallels become antithetical parallels through the use of comedy, is at work in a number of stories. As in the books where comedy is more dominant, repetition with variation and even with complication is the key principle through which comic effects are achieved. The principle of multiple perspectives also enables the author to contrast comic versions of a series of events with more detached versions, leaving the reader more or less free to judge for himself. That the reader is not very often "free" in any important sense in his interpretation of a Faulkner text is in part also a result of the type of comic writing where the comedy functions as a narrative strategy to deceive in order to mislead while a story unfolds slowly. Hans Bungert sees, with good reason, such comedy at work in *Go Down, Moses*.¹⁰

An understanding of Faulkner's work where cosmic despair or uni-

versal pessimism rule the ground has long since been replaced by an appreciation of his fictional universe as one where the comic and the tragic co-exist, and must do so in any fictional world experienced, observed, or imagined in its totality.

The comic elements in Faulkner's fiction are integrated parts of an intricate yet consistent attempt to show "man in his ageless struggle," and to show how people within the borders of his imaginary kingdom must respond to hypocrisy, stupidity, gluttony, and all the new ways of the world.

Seen in relation to a lifetime's struggle with elusive words, in order to create something where nothing was before, or seen in relation to what we may term the author's psychobiography, one may speculate why so much of wild exaggeration and hilarious comedy was blended into, contrasted to, included in books with very serious thematic concerns. Did Faulkner principally use comic effects for relief, to soften the impact of harsh criticism, to abate the agony of being alive and being a writer? One might mention several tragicomic incidents from real life to show Faulkner's bitter-ironic-comic talent outside his fictional world. He once met friends, blood running freely down his face from fresh scars, and when asked what this was all about, his laconic comment was simply "Estelle's signature". Such an incident and this kind of attitude may indicate some of the psychological factors behind the functions Faulkner gave to comedy in his fiction. He despaired of his writing time and again, and often felt depressed by life itself. The fact that tears so often give way for laughter in his fiction proves the strength both of the writing and of the man.

NOTES

1. Quoted from W. L. Miner, *The World of William Faulkner* (1952; reprint: New York: Cooper Square, 1963), p. 102.
2. The best study of Faulkner's humor in general and of its relationship to Southwestern humor is still Hans Bungert, *William Faulkner und die humoristische Tradition des amerikanischen Südens* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1971).
3. Although Hans Bungert printed the letters between Anderson and Faulkner as an appendix to his 1971 study, Joseph Blotner makes no mention of this in his notes in *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner*.
4. *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner*, ed. by Joseph Blotner (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 475.
5. *Uncollected Stories*, pp. 475–476.
6. *The Reivers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 82.
7. *The Reivers*, pp. 84–85.
8. *The Hamlet* (New York: Vintage Books, (n.d.)), p. 142.
9. *The Hamlet*, pp. 143–144.
10. See e.g. his "Summary" (p. 238) in *William Faulkner und die humoristische Tradition des amerikanischen Südens*.