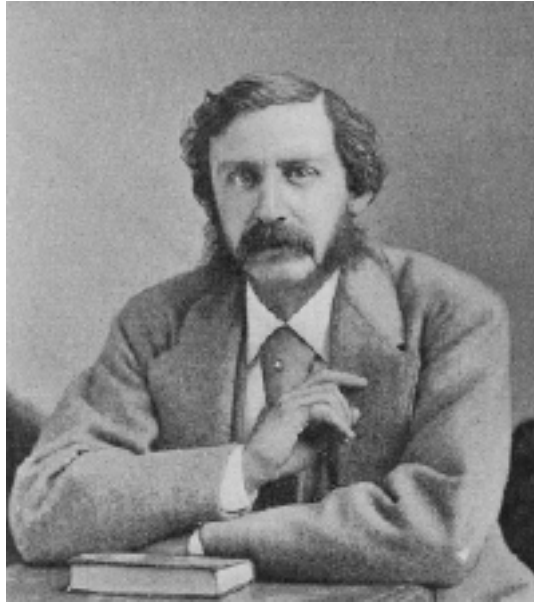


HUMOR



Bret Harte

(1836-1902)

ANALYSIS

“Tennessee’s Partner” (1868)

Wallace Stegner judged this to be the best story by Bret Harte, a minor local colorist whose fiction has been compared to Dickens: melodramatic, sentimental and cartoonlike. The story is typical of Harte, an adept storyteller who exploited the stereotypical romantic vision of the frontier West that was popular in the East. As a boy of 18, Harte sailed from the East to San Francisco, in 1854. Like his later acquaintance there, Mark Twain, he was a miner for awhile, on the Stanislaus River. Then he became a western journalist, editor and popular writer best known for *The Luck of Roaring Camp* (1868). Success destroyed him as a writer.

“Tennessee’s Partner” is set in the same year Harte arrived in the port of San Francisco. He means to describe his own fiction in rendering Sandy Bar the mining town as a place where “sentiment was modified by a strong sense of humor.” It is funny when Tennessee’s Partner refers to the deceased as the “diseased,” but otherwise the humor is weak compared to Twain, who was just starting his career when Harte published this story. Harte’s style is plain, with only a few metaphors, one conventional, another original: (1) “The feverishness of the day, and its fierce passions, still filled the camp”; (2) “The redwoods, burying their moccasined feet in the red soil, stood in Indian-file along the track.” His limitations are evident when he contrasts the beauty and serenity of Nature as a background for the hanging of Tennessee without sharpening the irony to a point in the context of an indifferent Naturalistic universe, as Crane later does throughout *The Red Badge of Courage*.

Unlike Twain, who adopted the attitude of a common man—more truly like the miners telling stories in the saloons—Harte’s tone is educated and condescending to his characters, like an Easterner toward the quaint and colorful primitives out West. Tennessee’s Partner, the humble miner, is stout, dirty and red-faced: “His aspect under any circumstances would have been quaint, and was now even ridiculous.” Harte’s tone of educated superiority is expressed in formal diction when the partner comments on the hot weather:

“He paused a moment, but nobody volunteering any other meteorological recollection, he again had recourse to his pocket handkerchief, and for some moments mopped his face diligently.” Twain intensely disliked Harte and considered him a phony.

Also unlike Twain, Harte romanticizes the West like an author of dime novels. The narrator identifies himself with the gambler and thief Tennessee, who “had a fine flow of humor”—a natural man whose prototype is “the grizzly.” He empties his revolver “at the crowd before the Arcade Saloon,” yet Harte depicts him as the moral equivalent of the lawman who arrests him: “Both were fearless, both self-possessed and independent; and both types of a civilization that in the seventeenth century would have been called heroic, but, in the nineteenth, simply ‘reckless’.” The arrest scene implies that the law is merely a game between winners and losers.

Tennessee’s Partner is so innocent and generous, in attempting to free his partner he offers the judge a bribe in open court—offering all he owns. Harte implies an injustice to Tennessee the outlaw (1) by naming the Judge Lynch, “who, whether bigoted, weak, or narrow, was at least incorruptible”; and (2) by portraying the Judge as adversely influenced in his ruling by the offer of a bribe, hence not really incorruptible after all—a lynching judge. After Tennessee empties his revolver at a crowd, we are not told how many people he killed or injured, whereas his execution is called a “foolish deed” and he is portrayed as admirable in meeting his death: “How he met it, how cool he was, how he refused to say anything.” He is the reticent western hero, a romanticized outlaw.

Tennessee’s Partner is his opposite: peaceful, humble, generous, self-sacrificial, with a “simple self-reliance” and great strength displayed when he lifts Tennessee’s coffin on his back, emphasizing how he bears the burden of his partner’s sins, like a cross. He is so good he even accepts and forgives Tennessee when he steals his wife. “His ways ain’t allers my ways,” he says with total tolerance, a pastoral exemplar the opposite of puritanical Judge Lynch. His sacrifice of himself for the sins of another makes him a Christ-evoking figure, eliciting “a suspicion of his general sanity.” His devoted loyalty is like that of an ideal wife to a husband. He is virtually the Victorian angel in the house, with nothing to live for after his partner dies. At their mining campsite, he is likely the one who did the cooking. Many men went West to escape the matriarchal Victorian culture of the East and Harte is making a joke by depicting a surrogate marriage between two grizzled miners. Tennessee is a drunk and many a night his partner has to go out and fetch him home, enacting one of the most familiar marital dramas of that day.

The only sentence that rises above ordinary in style introduces the end of the story, with alliteration, assonance, metaphor, vivid imagery and evocative rhythm: “One night, when the pines beside the cabin were swaying in the storm, and trailing their slender fingers over the roof, and the roar and rush of the swollen river were heard below, Tennessee’s Partner lifted his head from the pillow, saying, “It’s time to go for Tennessee.” Dying, he has a delirious “fancy”—or religious vision—of making his way through the dark to the sight of his partner coming up a hill to meet him: “sober, and his face a-shining.” By convention, spouses are reunited in Heaven. Harte appeals to the most powerful sentiments of his readers, affirming their religious faith and vicariously fulfilling their dreams in a climax that is both reverent and a parody. The reader cannot help but feel glad for the partner that the unrepentant thieving killer Tennessee was able to shoot his way through the pearly gates.

Michael Hollister (2015)