

AMERICAN FRONTIERSMEN IN 19TH CENTURY AS REPRESENTED IN AUGUSTUS B. LONGSTREET'S "THE FIGHT"

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Abstract

Particular literary works have a great significance that they can also act as historical documents through which readers can trace back the phenomena of the society in the era in which those literary works were written. One of those literary works is Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's "The Fight", a short story which was said to be the cornerstone of the birth of southwestern humor literature. Falling into the category of literature of the frontier, this short story depicts the lives of Georgian people as frontiersmen in the early 19th century. This study's objective is to unveil how American frontiersmen is represented by the author and how this representation is related to the Georgian society at that time. This study found that there was a history of violence among frontiersmen, there was glorifying masculinity, and there was dirt-eating perversion due to the harshness of the nature of the frontier and the social condition at that time.

Key words: *humor, southwestern humor, frontier, frontiersmen*

Introduction

Frontiersmen have great significance to the creation of a nation, especially America. Without their courage and audacity to settle in the backwoods, American's westward expansion would have never been possible. A study on these frontiersmen can be done through literary works produced in the American frontier as literary works can act as historical account recording social realities which are artistically portrayed by the author (Wellek and Warren, 1956:102).

"The Fight" is a literary work or a cultural artifact which portrays the Georgian society as frontiersmen in the first half of the nineteenth century. Published in *Georgia Scenes, Characters, Incidents, Etc. in the First Half Century of the Republic* in 1835, this short story is considered as a literary sketch, written by a Georgian lawyer, judge, state senator, and college president Augustus Baldwin Longstreet for readers outside of Georgian society (David Rachels, 2005). Longstreet's purpose in writing *Georgia Scenes* was to preserve Georgia's social history. In his words, he wanted "to supply a chasm in history which has always been overlooked—the manners, customs, amusements, wit, dialect as they appear in all grades of society to an ear and eye witness of them" (David Rachels, 2005).

"The Fight" is known as an anecdote. Longstreet chose to use humor in documenting the Georgian society at that time in the story; because of this, he is more well-known as a southwestern humorist rather than as a lawyer or a state senator. Employing humor in portraying American frontiersmen were commonly

done by southern writers in the era of early nineteenth century. For several decades before the civil war these frontier humorists were keen-eyed observers of the human scene. For the most part they were not professional writers – just like Longstreet, and they probably thought of themselves as recording rather than imaginatively creating the tales they wrote (Werlock, 2010: 261).

This study's purpose is to investigate how Longstreet represents the American frontiersmen through the characterizations of the five characters in his short story, "The Fight".

Approach to the Study

Sociocultural-Historical approach is employed in this study as it concerns with the social, cultural, and historical environment in the literary work. I believe that the only way to locate a literary work is in reference to the civilization that produces it. According to Rohberger, critics whose major interest is the sociocultural-historical approach define civilization as the attitude and action of a specific group of people and point out that literature takes this attitudes and actions as its subject matter. Because of this, it is essential for the critics to investigate the social background in which a work created and in which it necessarily reflects (Wellek and Warren, 1971: 9). In line with Rohberger, Thomas Warton believes that literature has the ability to record its period characteristics. The historian critics will examine literature from the same period to identify the feature. To do this, they analyze the writers' attitude and social opinion in order to know about politics, economy and social problems at that period (Wellek and Warren, 1971: 9). With this sociocultural-historical approach, I attempt to interpret "The Fight" short story within the context of Georgian social condition and culture in the early nineteenth century.

Review of Related Literature

Because the writer employs humor in "The Fight", it is essential to know what actually humor in literature is.

Humor

The term Humor is derived from an old theory of physiology to name four chief liquid in human body. The conditions of *humors* define both physical diseases and mental and moral disposition ("temperaments") (William Harmon, 2003: 252). A disordered state of *humors* produced more exaggerated characteristics. This conception of humors lead to the concept of humor in Elizabethan literature to mean "disposition", then "mood", or "characteristics peculiarity," later specialized to "folly," or "affectation" (William Harmon, 2003: 252). In the progress, the term humor carries the meaning of "eccentricity" or "human disposition". It implies a sympathetic recognition of human values and deals with the foibles and incongruities of human nature (William Harmon, 2003: 539).

Humor plays an important role in American literature. It has acted as catalytic agent for the changes in America as an expanding nation and its mingled people

(Spiller, 1974:728). As stated earlier, humor is born of incongruities and Americans have always had plenty. However, at every stage of awkward and uneven growth of American people, American humorists have spoken to their extravagances and helped them appreciate their common humanity (Spiller, 1974:728).

“The Fight” story belongs to southwestern humor, a literary tradition which was composed mainly during the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, and which set somewhere near the frontier line of the South as it moved from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River and beyond. The characteristic form of this tradition is the humorous sketch, a form reflecting both the modest ambitions of most Southwestern humor and its modest origins (Robinson, 2004: 370).

Georgian Society in early 19th century

The history of violence in the southern literature was a mirror for the real violence in southern area in the 1700s and 1800s. The culture of fistfight reflects how temperamental the southern people were at that time. Experts argue that the violence cultures of the Georgians were much influenced by temperature of the area, poverty, and slavery (David Rachels, 2005). In the literary works the style of the fights was somewhat detailed and exaggerated, making the reader to question the realism of it. However, there is ample evidence that history of “rough and tumble” fights in the southwest was brutal indeed. In the 17th and 18th century, there were at least two colonies and one state passed law as their effort to temper the fights. Virginia, for example, passed anti-fight law in 1748, which was revised in the 1772 to include gouging one’s eye and “stomping” on people (David Rachels, 2005). The fights did not only happen among lower class people; both lower and upper class people could also be engaged in brutal fighting. This culture had even hardly faded away when the society entered the twentieth century (David Rachels, 2005).

Discussion

Characterizations of the Characters in “The Fight” Story

In literature, character is a verbal representation of human being as presented to us by authors through the depictions of conversations, descriptions, reactions, inner thoughts and reflections, and also through the authors’ own interpretive commentary. (Edgar V. Roberts, 2003: 66). Marjorie Boulton in *The Anatomy of the Novel*, stated that there are various ways in revealing a character, among them are through a direct statement of the narrator – can be in a simple or a fancy form, a direct statement by comic accumulation detail, direct statement by the person himself, direct statement about the character by another character, dramatization – the character shows his trait in action, and stream of consciousness – we are given an attempted representation of what is going through the character’s mind (1975: 89).

Among the five characters from “The Fight” analyzed in this study, two of them are major characters Billy Stalling and Bob Durham. They are leaders of two

battalions. Billy ruled the upper battalion and Bob the lower (Longstreet, 1998). Both of them are described as the best men of the country since the beginning of the story.

“— two men (:Billy Stalling and Bob Durham) who were admitted on all hands to be *the very best men in the county, which in the Georgia vocabulary means they could flog any other two men in the county.*

...Both were admirable specimens of human nature in its finest form. *Billy's victories had generally been achieved by the tremendous power of his blows, one of which had often proved decisive of his battles;*

... Bob's by his adroitness in bringing his adversary to the ground. This advantage he had never failed to gain at the onset, and when gained *he never failed to improve it to the defeat of his adversary*” (Longstreet, 1998).

From the quotation above we know that what makes men to be the best men in the Georgia was their ability to fight. Billy Stalling and Bob Durham fell into this category for they were described as undefeatable. Not to mention they had finest physical proportion. The similarities between the two make them be compared to each other, and the folks living around them were wandering which one of them is better. Even so, Billy Stalling and Bob Durham remained good friends.

“When they met however, they were always very friendly indeed at their first interview they seemed to conceive a wonderful attachment to each other, which rather increased than diminished as they became better acquainted; so that, but for the circumstance which I am about to mention, the question, which had been a thousand times asked, “Which is the best man, Billy Stallions (Stallings) or Bob Durham?” would probably never have been answered (Longstreet, 1998).”

...These disputes (about who the stronger man is) often led to the argumentum ad hominem, but with such equality of success on both sides as to leave the main question just where they found it. They usually ended, however, in the common way -- with a bet; and many a quart of old Jamaica (whiskey had not then supplanted rum) was staked upon the issue. Still, greatly to the annoyance of the curious, Billy and Bob continued to be good friends (Longstreet, 1998).”

The friendship between the two depicted in the quotation above, unfortunately, was temporary. It turned out that Billy Stalling and Both Durham only needed a single trigger to fight: their wives quarrel. Here are the dialogues.

"Look here, woman," said Billy, "have you got a husband here? If you have, I'll lick him till he learns to teach you better manners, you sassy heifer you!"

...

Bob sprang to the store in a minute, followed by a hundred friends; for the bully of a county never wants friends.

"Bill Stallions," said Bob, as he entered, "what have you been saying to my wife?"

"Is that your wife?" inquired Billy, obviously much surprised and a little disconcerted

"Yes, she is; and no man shall abuse her, I don't care who he is."

"Well," rejoined Billy, "it ain't worthwhile to go over it; I've said enough for a fight and if you'll step out we'll settle it!"

"Billy," said Bob, "are you for a fair fight?"

"I am," said Billy. "I've heard much of your manhood, and I believe I'm a better man than you are. If you will go into a ring with me we can soon settle the dispute."

"Choose your friends," said Bob; "make your ring, and I'll be in with mine as soon as you will!" (Longstreet, 1998)

The first dialogue above shows how Billy's words to Bob's wife were very harsh. He did not use proper words to talk to a lady. In southwestern humor, harsh language was often used in the dialogue among the characters. Meanwhile, the rest of the dialogues show the two characters' arrogance in relation to their physical strength and how a little matter such as a quarrel of wives can lead to a fatal decision: a fight. The two had a brutal fight afterwards, with people of their battalions gathered around them watching (Longstreet, 1998). This barbarous fight eventually left the two men permanently handicapped as pictured in the following quotation.

"I looked, and saw that Bob had entirely lost his left ear and a large piece from his left cheek. His right eye was a little discolored, and the blood flowed profusely from his wounds.

Bill presented a hideous spectacle. About a third of his nose, at the lower extremity, was bit off, and his face so swelled and bruised that it was difficult to discover in it anything of the human visage, much more the fine features which he carried into the ring (Longstreet, 1998)."

The narration shows a vivid description of how the two major characters were badly injured in their fight. Their equal strength left the two equally impaired and it seemed that they were going to live the rest of their lives with the scars. The ending, though, AMERICAN FRONTIERSMEN IN 19TH CENTURY AS REPRESENTED IN AUGUSTUS B. LONGSTREET'S "THE FIGHT" – Elisabeth Oseanita Pukan

was surprising as the two did not have any desire to avenge each other in another fight despite of the tremendous scars they got. Here is what happened in the end of the story.

“Durham and Stallings kept their beds for several weeks, and did not meet again for two months. When they met, Billy stepped up to Bob and offered his hand, saying, "Bobby, you've licked me a fair fight; but *you wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been in the wrong. I oughtn't to have treated your wife as I did;* and I felt SO through tile whole fight; and it sort o' cowed me."

"Well Billy," said Bob, "let's be friends. Once in the fight, when you had my finger in your mouth, and was peeling me in the face and breast, I was going to halloo; but I thought of Petsy, and knew tile house would be too hot for me if I got whipped when fighting for her, after always whipping when I fought for myself." (Longstreet, 1998)”

The dialogues between Bob Durham and Billy Stalling show their regret of having to fight each other because of their wives. Billy was even sorry for his inappropriate treatment to Bob’s wife and apologized for it. The two decided to become friends since then.

It can be inferred that although they had physical strength, the major characters of “The Fight” were shallow and short tempered. They did not think carefully before they made a decision. When they got emotional, they were very violent, verbally and physically, as described in the dialogue. However, once they got their sanity back, they became sincere and friendly to each other.

The other characters which can be found in the story are Mrs. Durham and Mrs. Stalling. The characterizations of the two are similar. Both are minor characters in the story that triggered the major conflict in the story – the battle between Billy Stalling and Bob Durham. Their quarrel was begun in a shop where they both wanted to be served first.

“The exercises of the day were just over, when Mrs. Stallings and Mrs. Durham stepped simultaneously into the store of Zephaniah Atwater, from "down East."

"Have you any Turkey red?" said Mrs. S.

"Have you any curtain calico?" said Mrs. D. at the same moment.

"Yes, ladies," said Mr. Atwater, " I have both."

"Then help me first," said Mrs. D., "for I'm in a hurry."

"I'm in as great a hurry as she is," said Mrs. S., "and I'll thank you to help me first."

"And, pray, who are you, madam?" continued the other.

"Your betters, madam," was the reply.

At this moment Billy Stallings stepped in. "Come," said he, "Nancy, let's be going; it's getting late."

"I'd 'a' been gone half an hour ago," she replied, "if it hadn't 'a' been for that impudent hussy."

"Who do you call an impudent hussy, you nasty, good-for-nothing, snaggle-toothed gaub of fat, you?" returned Mrs. D. (Longstreet, 1998)"

From the dialogues above, we can make an inference that Mrs. Durham and Mrs. Stalling were impatient and impudent. They were not even able to take turns when they shopped and refused to wait for the shopkeeper to serve them. When they were offended, they cursed one another with harsh words. We can also see arrogance through their utterances claiming that they are better. This is not how we imagine women of older times would behave, as people would imagine that women in the past were meek, calm, and well-mannered.

The last character discussed in this study is Ransy Sniffle. Ransy Sniffle is the central comical figure in *The Fight*. Longstreet creates this character as exaggeration of ordinary people. Here is the description of Ransy Sniffle.

"...a sprout of Richmond, who, in his earlier days, had fed copiously upon red clay and blackberries. This diet had given to Ransy a complexion that a corpse would have disdained to own, and an abdominal rotundity that was quite unprepossessing. His joints were large and his limbs small; and as for flesh, he could not, with propriety, be said to have any. Those parts which nature usually supplies with the most of this article-the calves of the legs, for example-presented in him the appearance of so many well-drawn blisters ... His height was just five feet nothing; and his average weight in blackberry season, ninety-five (Longstreet, 1998)."

The quotation explains Ransy Sniffle as human with no physical proportion or even hideous looks. He was also weak, as the narrator said that he had large joints and small limbs and he ate the dirt. If we tried to compare Ransy Sniffle with Billy Stalling and Bob Durham, we will find two opposite poles. Billy and Bob were praised for their finest physical proportion in the story, while Ransy was so descended.

The thing that delights Ransy Sniffle was witnessing and fomenting a fight. Take a look at the following quotation.

"There was nothing on this earth which delighted Ransy so much as a fight. He never seemed fairly alive except when he was witnessing, fomenting, or talking about a fight (Longstreet, 1998)"

Ransy's predilection for fight as depicted in the quotation above is ironic. His love in fight was not supported by his physical strength. He was not muscular at all and his body was far from those of Billy Stalling and Bob Durham. He would certainly die in a fight. Consequently, he often tried to find some causes which can burn people into fighting. Ransy even tried to make Billy Stalling and Bob Durham, the two best men in the country, to get involved in a fight.

“Ransy had been kept for more than a year in the most torturing suspense as to the comparative manhood of Billy Stalling and Bob Durham. He had resorted to all his usual expedients to bring them in collision, and had entirely failed (Longstreet, 1998).”

At first, Ransy failed to make Billy and Bob fight each other, but eventually in the end of the story his wish to see the duel of the two best men in the country was granted. Ransy is the one who told Billy Stalling that Billy's wife had been verbally abused by Bob. He even provoked Billy to fight Bob for his deed. Here are the dialogues.

“...It was Ransy Sniffle, who had been listening in breathless delight to all that had passed.

“Don't talk to me!” said Ransy. “Bob Durham, you'd better go long yonder and take care of your wife. They're playing h——l with her there, in Zeph Atwater's store. Dodetarnally darn my soul, if any man was to talk to my wife as Bill Stallions is talking to yours, if I wouldn't drive blue blazes through him in less than no time! (Longstreet, 1998)”

From the last words of Ransy, we can see provocation. It is interesting to see how a person like Ransy Sniffle was so eager to see two best men in his country engaged in a fight. In general, the main interest of this character is only fight.

Humor Characteristics Found in the Characters' Characterizations

William Harmon stated that the derived meaning of humor is individual disposition and eccentricity (2003: 539). It is associated with foibles and incongruities of human nature, manner or human disposition, exaggeration, disharmony, grotesque or peculiarity (Harmon, 2003:539). All of the characters analyzed in the story can be easily related to these characteristics of humor.

Foible, incongruities of human nature, disharmony, and grotesque can be found in the characteristics of Ransy Sniffle, the central comical figure of the story. He has a very strange habit—foible—of eating red clay and blackberries which was said to give him a complexion that a corpse would have disdained to own and an

abdominal rotundity that was quite unprepossessing (Longstreet, 1998). This foible made him have no harmonious physical proportion i.e. a body with round belly, large joints and small limbs. This character is absurd and ridiculous because with his disproportional physical condition, which certainly causes him unable to fight, he was very fond of battle. Unfortunately, his predilection for fight often lead him to burn other people to fight one another (Longstreet, 1998).

Incongruities of manner can be seen in Billy Stalling and Bob Durham and their wives' characterizations. Stalling and Durham's being best men in the country, as said by the narrator, do not go with their short temper, poor consideration before taking action, and shallow mindedness. The brutal fight they were into was certainly not worth it. The title of best men attached to them only means physical strength, ability to fight, and fine physical proportion. This title had nothing to do with intelligence or good manner. They could defeat any other men in the country, but they could not defeat themselves to control their anger. Likewise, their wives' behavior does not go with the fact that they were women who were expected to behave in certain way. Women were expected to have meekness, but these women presented in the story did not have meekness characteristic at all.

Readers can find exaggeration characteristic of humor in the way the narrator describes the masculinity of Billy Stallings and Bob Durham and the peculiarity of Ransy Sniffle. Stallings and Durham's masculinity is described as perfectly flawless. The narrator goes very detail about it even with the explanation of their heights, their weights, and their physical abilities. Ransy Sniffle's imperfection is also described in detail; so detail that the readers might not believe that such person can exist.

The exaggerated, incongruent and peculiar portrayal of the characters in this story is certainly laughable. Readers might find these characters as folly. However, beyond this funny depiction of characters, there is actually a realistic representation of Georgian as American frontiersmen in the early 19th century.

Depiction of Georgian Society in the Nineteenth Century through the Characters' Characterizations in "The Fight"

Spiller in his *Literary History of the United States* states that Longstreet's tales in Georgian Scenes, including "The Fight", are of less civilized times in the back country; and they consist of nothing more than fanciful combinations of real incidents and characters (1974: 739). As has been stated earlier, history records that the government passed various laws as an attempt to reduce belligerent behavior in the society. In 1748, there were various anti-fighting laws passed in Virginia. Gouging eyes and cutting out other people's tongue were considered as felony in North Carolina, and there was also a law in South Carolina which forbade people in biting off one's fingers. This kind of barbarity in the society, specifically in frontiersmen society, is the one presented in "The Fight" story.

John Donald Wade states that "The Fight" is peculiarly interesting as throwing the light on the manner of combat and the perversion of dirt-eating

(1969:172). There was corroboration from a man who was born in 1820 saying that he saw men fight, even in political gathering. The fight was so brutal that in the aftermath people could pick up fingers, ears, and pieces of noses (Wade, 1969:172). This realism was captured by Longstreet in the viciousness of the battle between the two major characters of “The Fight” story. The witness also said that if two men quarreled, their friends would set them up to fight. This is just like Ransy Sniffle character who always attempted to set the two major characters up into a fight. Despite the brutal fight, the fighters would shake hands, take drinks of corn whiskey or peach brandy together, tease each other and help each other (Wade, 1969:173). This is what happened to the characters of Billy Stallings and Bob Durham in the story who reconciled easily as soon as they saw each other. Meanwhile, dirt-eating, which in the story was described as the habit of Ransy Sniffle character, was said to be the depravity of to which person living in a warm climate have always been subject (Wade, 1969:173). This information stirred the curiosity of investigator and they found that this habit had caused hookworm disease. In 1837, *The Charleston Southern Literary Journal* published a realistic story about this vice. It turned out that people’s craving for dirt was caused by acidity in the stomach that could only be set right with magnesia (soap-like white dirt). This article says that this disease grew upon its victim more and more. It made their skin become first sallow, and at length yellow, and their lips become colorless, and their whole countenance assumes a cadaverous appearance (Wade, 1969:173). This violence and dirt-eating perversion found in the south in that era are clearly related to Longstreet’s characters in the story. With this affirmation, it seems that the characters and the conflict they had been through were not overly exaggerated. Dirt-eating vice in the south in the early of 19th century was real and so was brutal fight that could permanently impair the combatants.

Frontiersmen’s lives as depicted in the story, and as verified by a man living in that era shows how tough and rough the circumstances they were living in. The physical and verbal violence colored their lives, and the scarcity they suffered even led some of them to dirt-eating habit which worsened their physical condition. These conditions cannot be clearly understood without understanding the fact that they have to live in the wilderness, the backwoods—the American frontier. As Frederick Jackson Turner puts it, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave, the meeting point of savagery and civilization (1963:28). Order, in this meeting point, was certainly not something that could be instantly established. It was not only the rough nature that they faced back then, but they also had to live with people of different origins. Tension, friction, and violence were sometimes inevitable. Nevertheless, in this story, and as supported by the confirmation of an eye witness, it was also depicted of how these frontiersmen were easily reconciled after brutal conflicts. It is arguable that this noble trait they had also played role in the continuous development of frontier area. Had they were vengeful people, the frontier would have been a place of constant conflict, and order would have been so difficult to establish.

The American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line (Turner, 1963:28). This story, together with the portrayal of rough, folly, and innocent frontiersmen is a reminder for the readers about this statement. The glorifying of masculinity, which was needed to adapt to a rough nature, how barbarous they could be and how they could have strange perversion such as eating dirt in order to ease the ache in their stomach, all of these explain how primitive and difficult the state they were in.

“The Fight” as part of bigger body of southwestern humor literature gives major contribution in recording the development of America as a nation. Spiller once stated that the recognition of unity and amid differences, the addition of imaginative sympathy to a sense of reality, and the acceptance of a common denominator in a people of innumerable origins and widespread regions make humor important in America (1974: 728). This story, together with its peculiar and folly characters, helps the readers to see a creation process of America as a great nation.

Conclusion

“The Fight” as a part of southwestern humor literary works gives major contribution in representing the frontiersmen’s lives in the early nineteenth century. There is a history of violence in the society, of glorifying masculinity, and even of dirt-eating perversion due to the harshness of the nature of the frontier and the social condition at that time. Through its folly characters, this story reminds people that order and harmony in the frontier was not achieved easily. It was a long trip of adjustment, civilization, religious teachings, and education. It is not an exaggeration to say that it is not only the journey of the Georgian frontiersmen that is represented in the story; it is of American people as a nation. Longstreet as a Southwestern humorist helps the readers to look back, learn from history and appreciate the whole process underwent by the society, the process of the creation of America.

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