

# The Humor of Tobacco Road

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In the year 1930 a young man named Erskine Caldwell, a native of the state of Georgia, declared to himself that he would never be satisfied as a writer until he had written a full-length novel about the tenant farmers and sharecroppers he had known during his boyhood in East Georgia. His motivation, as he described it, was compassion: "I could not become accustomed to the sight of children's stomachs bloated from hunger and seeing the ill and aged too weak to walk to the fields to search for something to eat," but nothing he wrote on paper, he said, "succeeded in conveying the full meaning of the poverty and hopelessness and degradation" he had observed. The novel that he wanted to write and did write was called ***Tobacco Road***, the title coming from the back country trails made by rolling hogsheads of tobacco leaf from the high East Georgia farms down to the Savannah River for shipment to the factories. ***Tobacco Road***, published in 1932, was not an immediate success. Total sales that first year were only a few thousand copies, but when this and some of Caldwell's later novels were published in inexpensive paper-back editions the sales went into the millions.

What can account for this tremendous popularity of books chiefly about scarcely human creatures lost in the rural background of an increasingly industrialized, urbanized society? Upon reading ***Tobacco Road*** one might be inclined to see it as an attempt to give a realistic account of unfortunate people so dehumanized that one can scarcely feel compassion for their plight. One might

think that the book should be tragic instead of comic. But tragedy centers upon characters that have the sensibility to comprehend their own predicament, and by such a measure *Tobacco Road* is no tragedy. Yet in view of the appalling things that happen in the novel, do we dare call it a comedy? Is it comic when a man is so hungry that he steals raw turnips from his son-in-law while that young man is openly engaged in sexual intercourse with his wife's sister? Is it comic when an aged mother, unwelcome at the family table, is forced to eat what she can gather from the fields and woods? Is it comic when a member of this degraded family runs his automobile into a Negro's farm wagon and leaves the dying man under the weight of the overturned wagon? From these events it would seem that what we have in *Tobacco Road* is an accumulation of horrors that will match even William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, published one year earlier than *Tobacco Road*. Why, then, can we call this a comic novel and consider these monstrous people as comic characters?

There are a number of possible answers to this question, but I will elaborate only one. Erskine Caldwell's writings, whatever their social motivation, are in a tradition of American humor that reaches back over a century to the humorous tales of that region once called the Southwest, a region which included Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Kentucky, Louisiana and Arkansas. It was in **1836** that an eminent gentleman, a distinguished judge and educator named Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, published a collection of stories about backwoodsmen in Georgia. The book was entitled *Georgia Scenes*, and these scenes contain horrors enough, although they are intended to be comic. There are fights between backwoodsmen, who claw and bite each other like animals. Ears and noses are bitten off, and stalwart young men are maimed for life in imbecilic brawls. Are these stories really humorous? Yes, because the backwoodsmen who participate in the violence and brutality do not view themselves tragically. To them violence and brutality are the norms of existence and they live accordingly. They can be treated in the comic vein because they are made to seem incapable of the pity and fear of ordinary human beings. It is difficult to feel compassion for those who regard the loss of an eye or a nose a trifling price to pay for the prestige of being a frontier

champion. It is possible to view such people humorously because to them a bloody fight is entertainment, and a victory in such a fight means local fame and admiration. In the frontier tradition of the old Southwest even the loser avoids pathos by the way he loses. If he has fought a good fight, he has his share of admiration. Violence, then, belongs to the tradition of frontier humor as it was established in the United States. The tradition was partly oral, and the feats of strength and qualities of savagery eventually reached the level of mythic exaggeration. One does not feel compassion for an earth spirit, because all norms of human emotion are absent to him. He is grotesque, insensible to pain and unconscious of affliction. Thus when these tales of violence and derring-do were written down and published, the audience that read them thought of the American backwoodsmen much as a medieval audience might have thought of elves, gnomes, and trolls. One can laugh when a goblin loses an arm or a leg, for he can always grow another.

Erskine Caldwell, then, inherited a literary tradition based at least partly on folk humor. This enabled him to write of the poor farmer of the backwoods as if he were devoid of all normal responses. Jeeter Lester, the hill man of *Tobacco Road*, seems incapable of any recognizable human response in any situation that should be productive of compassion, grief, or even anger. When his daughter Ellie May, whose face is deformed by a split upper lip, makes a sexual assault upon his son-in-law, Lov, Jeeter Lester's reaction is merely delight that the distraction enables him to steal Lov's bag of raw turnips. No one in the Lester family exhibits any normative sexual inhibitions. Whenever sexual intercourse is in prospect, all members of the Lester family, even including the aged, starving grandmother, gather to watch. They climb ladders to peer into bedroom windows when the sex act takes place indoors. They group themselves around the participants if it takes place in the fields or bushes. They are devoid of modesty, shame, and family feeling. The only emotion that Jeeter Lester is given to qualify him as a member of the human race is his agrarian desire to work the land, to raise cotton in his barren fields.

Henri Bergson has written that "a remarkable instinct . . . impels the comic poet, once he has elaborated his central character, to cause other characters, displaying the same general traits, to

revolve as satellites round him.” So it is with Erskine Caldwell’s comic characters. The traits of Jeeter Lester are reflected in his sons and daughters. All are enormously interested in sexuality, either to participate or to observe. They worship an automobile to the point of idolatry. None display any family feeling for brother, sister, father, mother, son or daughter. With the exception of Jeeter Lester’s farming instinct, which seems spurious in the context of his general shiftlessness, the attitude of any character is predictable, once one has learned the general traits of Lester himself. Their responses are mechanical, another source of the comic according to Henri Bergson. The comical in human action derives, in part, from the unthinking, automatic quality of a response, or a kind of machine-like indifference when an emotional reaction is called for. Although this lack of a response in certain situations is too gruesome to be called comic, in others it invites laughter. Thus we are shocked when Jeeter Lester actually forgets that his dying mother is lying on the ground unattended, but we are amused when he busies himself pumping up an automobile tire while his young daughter is actually seducing his son-in-law in full view of the family and passing Negroes. We are amused by the automatic quality of the responses of Jeeter and his son Dude when a new automobile is purchased. Jeeter shouts with joy as the automobile appears, and his moronic son, Dude, blows the horn constantly with machine-like regularity, although there are no other cars to be warned out of the way. These people respond like automatons to given stimuli, but like robots they fail to respond to situations that demand compassion or grief.

No doubt Erskine Caldwell has drawn these degenerates with the social purpose of dramatizing the dehumanization that takes place when a class of people are unable to find a place in society. The American critic Robert Cantwell found a good metaphor for this dehumanization when he wrote that the Lesters were “morally disembodied. They floated away from the world of normal reactions as if they had conquered some moral gravitational force.” It seems very strange that Caldwell, who sympathized with the poor white farmers of the South, should make them into grotesque monsters. Yet if we compare Jeeter Lester with the comic characters created

by the humorists of the old Southwest, we can see that he is following a well-established comic tradition.

The poor white of the South had been described in comic terms ever since the eighteenth-century Virginia gentleman, William Byrd II, gave an account of the poor whites he encountered on a surveying trip to North Carolina. Lazy, improvident, amoral, these "lubbers," as Byrd called them, were no more worthy of compassion than a herd of wild pigs, wallowing in the sun. This same contempt of the gentleman for the degenerate poor white may be seen in Judge Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's account of a Georgia backwoodsman named Ransy Sniffle. Writing in the 1830's, Judge Longstreet described Ransy as

a sprout . . . 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. Long spells of the fever and ague, too, in Ransy's youth, had conspired with clay and blackberries to throw him quite out of the order of nature. His shoulders were fleshless and elevated; his head large and flat; his neck slim and translucent; and his arms, hands, fingers, and feet, were lengthened out of all proportion to the rest of his frame.

One *should* feel pity for Ransy Sniffle, but pity for a grotesque wood-sprite is an inappropriate reaction.

With Judge Longstreet's tale, the prototype of the Southern poor white was established for literary purposes. The poor white was called a "cracker," a "wool-hat," or a "dirt-eater" by the more prosperous whites, and he was called "po' white trash" by the Southern Negroes. He reappears again and again in comic literature. In the comic masterpieces of George Washington Harris, a nineteenth-century Southern writer, the comic hero is named Sut Lovingood, and he is described as a "queer looking, long legged, short bodied, small headed, white haired, hog eyed" young man whose chief delights are playing practical jokes, sometimes cruel jokes, and seducing the frontier girls. Sexual amorality appears as comedy in the writings of George Washington Harris just as it does in the writings of Erskine Caldwell. The "cracker" type reappears again and again, significantly in Mark Twain's account

in *Huckleberry Finn* of the shiftless loafers in an Arkansas village. These degenerates sat around all day, principally occupied with chewing tobacco and spitting. As for their amusement, Twain writes, "There couldn't anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dog-fight-unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death." So even in the works of Mark Twain, who normally exhibited compassion for the poor and oppressed, the Southern poor white appears to be lazy, shiftless, brutal, and sadistic. By and large the comic literature dealing with the Southern poor whites has depicted them as completely amoral, in one way or another. Thus when the great William Faulkner wants to create a character to symbolize the ruthless, amoral, commercial spirit, it is not surprising that he chooses him from the class of poor whites. Faulkner's Flem Snopes, though set in the comic context of a novel called *The Hamlet*, is also too horrible a representation to arouse laughter, for he is a soulless commercial man, devoid even of the sexual appetite that at least qualifies Caldwell's characters for the animal kingdom, if not the human race.

We should be prepared then, when we read Erskine Caldwell's novels about the Southern poor whites, to find characters that conform in a number of ways to the prototypes developed by the Southwestern humorists of the past. We can expect violence, rampant sexuality, simplistic motivations, and unusual or even abnormal responses. Most of the characters will be illiterate, but they may have a flair for coarse, earthy eloquence when moved to speech by their chief interests: sex, food, a new automobile, or, in Jeeter Lester's case, a frustrated desire to cultivate the land. They will live in dilapidated cabins out in the infertile hills, where nothing will grow without fertilizer except pine trees and stunted oaks. Most of the children-the Lesters had seventeen children, twelve of whom are alive at the time of the novel-will go to the towns to work in the mills; but those who remain on the land will be unbelievably improvident. If money is obtained, it will be spent frivolously. If by some miracle a new automobile is purchased, it will be destroyed in a week by careless handling. Family affection is almost nonexistent. The children who escape from the pine

barrens and become prosperous in the city avoid their backwoods parents and feel nothing for them but shame and contempt. Brothers lust after brothers' wives, and sisters seduce their sisters' husbands. Fathers will sell adolescent daughters into marriage and will voice eloquent sexual admiration for their son's wives. In fact, Robert Cantwell has written that these characters are actually fearsome because they will do absolutely anything. None of the inhibitions operative in a civilized community restrain the actions of Jeeter Lester and his strange sons and daughters.

What then, does go on in **Tobacco Road**? As the novel opens, we find Lov Bensey, who has married Jeeter Lester's twelve-year-old daughter Pearl, trudging wearily toward the Lester cabin carrying a bag of raw turnips he has walked seven and a half miles to purchase. The Lesters have been watching his slow approach for half an hour. Lov has come to complain to Jeeter that Pearl will neither sleep with him nor talk to him, but the starving Lesters have eyes only for the bag of turnips. The entire first episode of the novel concerns Jeeter's efforts to steal the turnips and Lov's efforts to prevent him. Jeeter is eloquent in voicing his desire for the turnips, raising his voice in rural hyperbole and comic profanity as he blames God and nature for the fact that he has no turnips himself:

**By God and by Jesus, Lov, all the damn-blasted turnips I raised this year is wormy. And I ain't had a good turnip since a year ago this spring. All my turnips has got them damn-blasted green-gutted worms in them, Lov. What God made turnip-worms for, I can't make out. It appears to me like He just naturally has got it in good and heavy for a poor man.**

Then, with a comic reversal of his blasphemous attitude toward God, Jeeter indicates that Divine Providence, rather than his own efforts, will save the situation:

**God is got it in good and heavy for the poor. But I ain't complaining Lov. I say, "The Good Lord knows best about turnips." Some of these days He'll bust loose with a heap of bounty and all us poor folks will have all we want to eat and plenty to clothe us with.**

This eloquence fails to move Jeeter's son-in-law, who calmly sits and eats a large turnip while the starving Lesters look on hungrily.

Soon, however, Jeeter's hare-lipped daughter, Ellie May, tries to attract Lov's attention. Sitting on the hard white sand of the yard, she begins to slide toward Lov, arousing this unbrotherly comment from her brother Dude:

Ellie May's acting like your old hound used to do when he got the itch. Look at her scrape her bottom on the sand. That old hound used to make the same kind of sound Ellie May's making, too. It sounds just like a little pig squealing, don't it?

Thus the girl's sexual desire is reduced to the animal level and becomes a comic action. It is an ancient humorous device, familiar since the *fabliaux* the bawdy tales told in the Middle Ages. When people behave like subhuman creatures, we may be appalled, but if no harm is done, the reaction is usually laughter.

Eventually Ellie May, her actions reported in comic metaphor by her brother Dude, succeeds in arousing Lov's sexual ardor and Jeeter takes advantage of the distraction by stealing the bag of turnips. Meanwhile Ellie May, assisted vigorously by her mother and grandmother, has thrown Lov to the ground. It is a virtual rape, and all members of the family have assisted in one way or another. The grotesqueness of the situation is enhanced by the fact that Dude, Ellie May's brother, sits idly by attempting to make casual conversation with Lov while Ellie May has her hapless brother-in-law engaged in sexual intercourse. After the act is over, Dude sits on a stump idly watching red wood ants crawl over the naked body of his exhausted sister. Meanwhile Jeeter Lester has run off into the woods with the bag of turnips. Dude follows him, but has to take some turnips from his father by force. Finally Jeeter returns to the cabin with the remainder of the turnips. The three smallest ones he tosses on the floor to his old mother, whom he hates because she has lived so long. The turnip episode has occupied four and a half of the novel's nineteen chapters and it sets the pattern for the grotesque actions that follow.

In the succeeding chapters we see the sixteen-year-old Dude married to Bessie, who is more than twice his age. Bessie, a styled woman preacher, lusts after the moronic boy and secures his consent by buying a new automobile with her late husband's



insurance money. Bessie, like Ellie May, has a strange appearance. She was born with no bone in her nose, and her nostrils look like holes on the flat surface of her face. Bessie and Dude go for a wedding trip to a nearby town and spend the night in a cheap hotel, where Bessie is tricked into sleeping with every unattached male on the premises. It is a joyous night for her.

Terrible things happen later in the novel. Dude runs his new automobile into a farm wagon driven by a Negro and drives callously away while the Negro lies dying under the overturned wagon. The family is equally unconcerned when Dude backs the car over the body of his aged grandmother. The family let her lie there in her own blood; and Jeeter, her son, after forgetting her for a while, reacts in this unbelievable way when Lov asks if the old woman is dead: "She ain't stiff, yet, but I don't reckon she'll live. You help me tote her out in the field and I'll dig a ditch to put her in."

Finally, it is Jeeter's turn to die. The old cabin catches fire while Jeeter and his wife Ada are asleep. It burns to the ground with both of them in it. Dude regrets the death of his parents no more than he had the death of his grandmother; and the novel ends with Dude driving his car and blowing the horn with mechanical regularity, as it was his habit to do. His final words are that he thinks he will grow a crop of cotton, "like Pa was always talking about doing," but from what we have seen of the Lesters, Dude will no more plant the cotton than Jeeter had done. He will drive the car until it will no longer move, and then he will sit in his cabin waiting for something to happen.

What, finally, can we say about humor like this? As a social novel intended to arouse compassion for the plight of the Southern poor white, **Tobacco Road** must be considered a failure. The Lesters are too degenerate for the reader to believe in, and one must make at least a marginal identification with distress in order to respond to it. Yet as a comic novel, **Tobacco Road** has had enormous popular success. The name of the character Jeeter Lester has entered the American language to signify the Southern poor white, even though the character himself does not bear much resemblance to the class he has been chosen to typify. What Caldwell has done with Jeeter Lester is to create a character myth for the twentieth century,

just as George Washington Harris did with Sut Lovingood in the nineteenth. Ragged, forlorn, but irresistibly comic, Jeeter Lester is like some fabled beast-man out of folklore or backwoods legend. Caldwell's comic imagination overpowers his social conscience and produces, not a man, but a grotesque demon of the Southern hills. The novelist never surpassed this, his first novel, for in it he created a myth.