The Jimmy-John Boss and Other Stories Short Guide

The Jimmy-John Boss and Other Stories by Owen Wister

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Contents

Characters

Wister modeled Dean Drake after a cowboy acquaintance, Dean Duke, who is prominently mentioned in his 1895 journal. According to Wister's journal, Duke was a twenty-twoyear-old ranch foreman who had acquired some skill at mastering drunken cowboys. Like the Virginian, Duke had quiet confidence and steady judgment which placed him a notch above his peers. Reserved and thoughtful, Duke's dramatic counterpart, Drake, generally responds to tense situations by quietly withdrawing to smoke and ponder his next move. His passive "wait and watch" method appears to be the best management strategy since it cleverly allows him to avoid a bloody showdown with his liquor-courageous cowhands. When faced with a crisis, he relies on brains instead of brawn, and as a result of this good judgment, achieves the respect of his errant employees.

Hank, a dark and brooding character who appears in "Hank's Woman," is the embodiment of evil that is nurtured by the inherent rootlessness of the Western range. Wister once revealed a nagging suspicion that too much freedom unchecked by cultural restraint would inevitably breed a new kind of villainy. As he explains, a dangerous "sloth, in doing anything and everything, . . . is born of the deceitful ease with which makeshifts answer here [in the West]." Hank is evil because he is shiftless and unwilling to submit to civilizing forces brought to the frontier by the European and cultured Willomene. She patiently bears his fits of drunkenness and verbal abuse, but blasphemy she swiftly punishes. In The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains (1902), Trampas dies because he is incompetent, but Hank is murdered because he is immoral.

Social Concerns

As in The Virginian, Wister's primary concern in The Jimmy-John Boss and Other Stories is to preserve the frontier experience, to give literary form to the fast-fading life of the West. Unlike The Virginian, however, this diverse collection of short stories lacks stylistic and thematic unity. These startlingly varied vignettes range from the comically trivial to the tragically serious. Of the eight stories in the volume, all except "The Jimmy-John Boss" and "Hank's Woman" can be, dealt with in a sentence. "A Kinsman of Red Cloud" is a tale of the struggle between an army wagon master and a criminal halfbreed; "Sharon's Choice" is a humorous account of a children's speech contest; "Napoleon Shave-Tail" is a character sketch of a neophyte cavalry lieutenant; "Twenty Minutes for Refreshments" is a fatuous story about the judging of a baby contest; "The Promised Land" is an ugly portrait of one White Man's exploitation of the Indians' weakness for whiskey; and "Padre Ignazio" is a psychological study of a priest's uncertainty about his mission to the Western wilderness.

The cumulative effect of the six stories described above and the two stories to be analyzed more fully below, is to present a series of glimpses of Western life.

Techniques

When The Jimmy-John Boss and Other Stories appeared in 1900, critics collectively recognized Wister's writings as "structurally weak" but "rich in characterization." His tendency to rely on melodramatic scenes was especially castigated. For example, consider the moment in "Hank's Woman" when Willomene leaps from a cliff clinging to her dead husband. His obtrusive sentimentality also met with negative criticism. On the other hand, his characterizations were highly praised, and, in fact, the continuing influence of Wister is primarily seen in subsequent authors' imitation of Wister's memorable heroes and villains. Duke, in "The Jimmy-John Boss" and Hank, in "Hank's Woman" are prototypes of those characters in The Virginian which were so ardently admired by later Western writers.

Themes

"The Jimmy-John Boss" concerns a young man's rite of passage into manhood. Dean Drake, a slender youth of nineteen, is hired as a foreman to supervise an unruly band of cowhands at a remote cattle camp in the mountains.

His first challenge as foreman is to enforce a rule of temperance in the camp by forbidding liquor, stored in "demijohn" containers. The men obey his rule until Christmas festivities weaken their restraint. A drunken brawl ensues, and the outnumbered neophyte barely escapes with his life.

He returns, however, when the rebellion is over and shames the recalcitrant cowboys into submission. As a symbolic gesture of authority, he blasts the demon demijohn to pieces and forever gains the cowboys' loyalty.

"Hank's Woman" explores the sordid side of human nature, an innate brutality perhaps brought forth, as Wister explains, by a harsh and barren land: "I [began] to conclude, after five seasons of observation that life in this negligent, irresponsible wilderness tends to turn people shiftless, incompetent, and cruel." These negative traits are embodied in "little black Hank," a shiftless cowboy who victimizes a religious servant girl from Austria.

Stranded in the Yellowstone region by her former mistress, Willomene, a docile peasant girl, is seduced into marriage with the clever cowpoke, Hank. At first, Hank is merely callous toward his inexperienced bride but later turns to cruelty when she stubbornly clings to her cultural heritage by worshipping a crucifix which hangs prominently in their honeymoon cabin.

One day, in a fit of jealous rage, Hank shoots the crucifix, and she courageously responds by bludgeoning his skull with an ax. The story concludes with a poignant final scene of Willomene plunging over a rocky cliff to her death and dragging Hank's body with her.

Wister presents a moral assessment of the tragedy through a dialogue between a casual cowboy observer and the Virginian. The cowboy comments, "All this fuss just because a woman believed in God," and the Virginian replies, "You have put it down wrong; it's just because a man didn't."

Literary Precedents

The one clear influence on this collection is the "local color" story of such writers as Bret Harte and Mark Twain.

As one critic, John L. Cobbs, has pointed out, the notable feature of Wister's local color narrative is the frequent inclusion of the "dude, a good-hearted but inept easterner, usually the narrator, wandering wide-eyed in the strange, rough western world." The dude generally acts as the fascinated observer of the local color events, sometimes passing judgment on them.

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