

The American Frontier Character and His Relationship to Nature as Depicted by Thomas Bangs Thorpe

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Abstract: *While going unnoticed by many writers, the significance of the American frontiersman of the south did not escape the attention of Thomas Bangs Thorpe of Louisiana. This article tries to reinstate the importance that the frontiersman of the 19th century held in the eyes of this Old Southwest humorist. Thorpe humorously depicts this unique character to an almost a godly magnitude, yet at the same time, he retains his human traits, hence, remaining on a level readers could relate to. Even though the frontiersman's presence became sadly diminished as civilization advanced, Thorpe was able to revive him through his sketches. The speech, manners and lifestyle of the frontiersman, who evolves out of the American wilderness around him, all become Thorpe's means to successfully documenting one side of American history which might have gone unrecognized were it not for Thorpe's short stories.*

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a special localist writing which has not been given its due by modern critics. The Old Southwestern humorists have been somewhat neglected, although they evolved into historians chronologizing in their works an important era in American history. The purpose of this study is to reevaluate the significance of these localists by concentrating on the works of Thomas Bangs Thorpe, who was able to perceive the momentary existence of a unique entity in the history of American literature—that of the frontiersman of the south.

With the beginning of the nineteenth century, the American frontiersman gained great importance in literature as Romantic writers sought to establish his identity with the American wilderness from which the character originated. Perhaps the most successful of these writers were the Old Southwest humorists, among who was Thomas Bangs Thorpe of Louisiana. Thorpe takes his characters from the American wilderness, gives them a romantic aspect by relating them to nature, yet at the same time portrays them in such a realistic light that his frontiersmen become

some of the greatest fictional characters that nineteenth century American literature has ever produced.

Thomas Bangs Thorpe showed great concern for and interest in the kind of men the frontier was producing. The more he lived in the Southwest, the greater his interest in this type of character became. In 1846, he produced his first collection of sketches under the title *The Mysteries of the Backwoods; or Sketches of the Southwest; Including Character, Scenery, and Rural Sports*. He included the word 'character' in the title, but by the time his second collection was ready for publication in 1854, Thorpe had realized something new as he reached the conclusion: he was dealing with a unique entity, a new type of character. This character is significant in that he is truly American, reflecting the frontiersman who was there only for a temporary period of time. Thorpe wished to depict this character before he disappears and becomes part of a passing history; thus, his second collection of sketches appeared with the title *The Hive of "The Bee-Hunter": A Repository of Sketches, Including Peculiar American Character, Scenery, and Rural Sports*. Through emphasizing the 'peculiarity' of the frontiersman in the new title, Thorpe proceeds to comment on this character's existence in the nature that has created his uniqueness, as the author explains in the preface to his work:

Here in their vast interior solitudes, far removed from trans-Atlantic influences, are alone to be found, in the more comparative infancy of our country, characters truly *sui generis*—truly American. What man would be, uninfluenced by contact with the varied associations of long civilization, is here partially demonstrated in the denizens of the interior of a mighty continent. (6)

Examining the sketches from the second volume, one realizes that they reflect the author's tribute to the Western frontiersman. Not only does he reach his goal in recognizing the existence of this character, but also portrays him in the very act of relating to the wilderness around him. Some of the sketches are significant character studies whereas others discuss the sport of hunting, yet end in contributing information about the American frontiersman. Taken from the sketch "Mike Fink, the Keel-Boatman", the following definition is considered to be the most complete and general one which Thorpe offered of the Western character:

The manner, the language, and the dress of these individuals are all characteristics of sterling common sense—the manner modest, yet full of self-reliance; the language strong and forcible, from superiority of mind

rather than from education; the dress studied for comfort, rather than fashion—on the whole, you become attached to them and court their society. The good humor—the frankness—the practical sense, the reminiscences—the powerful frame—all indicate a character, at the present day anomalous. (163-164)

Thorpe's very first sketch depicts a frontier character with a unique occupation. Though the job of the backwoods local character, Tom Owen in "Tom Owen, the Bee-Hunter," is to top trees for the Feliciana planters, his real significance lies in his love for bee hunting. From the very first paragraph, Thorpe sadly reflects that bee hunting as a backwoods occupation is on its way to becoming extinct. He explains how this occurs,

As a country becomes cleared up and settled, bee-hunters disappear; consequently they are seldom or never noticed beyond the immediate vicinity of their homes (47).

Thorpe is not the only writer of the nineteenth century who saw bee hunting as a sufficiently heroic occupation. For example, chapter IX of Washington Irving's *A Tour on the Prairie* has the title "A Bee Hunt" and *The Prairie* by James Fenimore Cooper also figures a bee hunter among its characters. However, while the bee hunter Paul Hoover is of minor importance and secondary to the main frontier character, Natty Bumppo, in Cooper's novel, the bee hunter in Thorpe's sketch is the major figure.

Another frontier occupation that was about to disappear, because of the encroachment of settlement and because it had not been given its due in the 1840s, is that of the flat-boatmen or keel-men. In his first collection of sketches, Thorpe wrote a tale entitled "The Disgraced Scalp-Lock," that later appeared in the 1854 volume under a new title, "Mike Fink, the Keel-Boatman." The change in title indicates that Thorpe believed that the main importance resides in the frontier character of Mike Fink rather than in the incident of the shooting. Just as Tom is not given his due in "Tom Owen, The Bee-Hunter," the deeds of the boatmen go unnoticed too:

They were . . . hyperbolic in thought and deed, if compared with any other class of men. Their bravery and chivalrous deeds were performed without a herald to proclaim them to the world—they were the mere incidents of a border life, considered too common to attract attention, or outline the time of a passing wonder. Death has nearly

destroyed the men, and obscurity is fast obliterating the record of their deeds. (165)

Thorpe raises his frontiersmen to the level of great historical heroes, as he resembles them to figures from the past that were well known for their feats. For example, he compares Tom Owen with the likes of Nimrod and Davy Crockett, and other great hunters and seamen who have left their mark on history (47, 52). Thorpe solemnly treats this frontier hero with great dignity as he reflects on what his real status in history should have been and on his heroic episodes that have likewise been neglected:

Yes, the mighty Tom Owen has "hunted," from the time that he could stand alone until the present time, and not a pen has inked paper to record his exploits. 'Solitary and alone' has he traced this game through the mazy labyrinth of air; marked, I hunted;--I found;--I conquered; upon the carcasses of his victims and then marched homeward with his spoils. (47-48)

Thorpe even likens this 'mighty' bee hunter to one of the greatest figures in history because Tom hunted, found and conquered just as Julius Caesar came, saw and conquered. As is the fashion with all great men, Tom Owen ". . . had his followers, who, with a courtier-like humility depended upon the expression of his face for all their hopes of success" (49). These men are inspired by the greatness of their leader Tom, just as soldiers are truly inspired by their commanders when the battle begins. In describing the boatman Mike, Thorpe remarks that he is "strong as Hercules" (165). This may not seem so significant until one recalls that, according to myth, Hercules was half-mortal, half god. Thus, the accomplishments of Mike take on the grandeur of Hercules' miraculous labors as Mike's skillful rifle shot is magnified into a heroic deed worthy of demi-gods.

Thorpe's finest sketch "The Big Bear of Arkansas" simultaneously reflects his love of hunting and his knowledge of the frontier character of the Old Southwest. In *Thomas Bangs Thorpe: Humorist of the Old Southwest*, Rickels (1962) describes this tale as representing "The most notable achievement of the time in reproducing the character of the American frontiersman" (50-51). Just as the characters in the other sketches are compared to historical and mythological heroes, Thorpe analogizes Jim Doggett to Samson, another great historical hero. Jim is incapable of killing the bear which has reached the supernatural level and just as Jim fails in killing him, Samson would have failed also. If the feat

of the hunt is too great for Jim Doggett, then it would certainly have been too great for Samson; therefore, Jim is elevated to the level of Samson (92).

Another characteristic, which can be found in Thorpe's analysis of the frontier character, is his distinction from the other characters in the sketches. In both "Tom Owen, the Bee-Hunter" and "The Big Bear of Arkansas," we have two worlds of characters in addition to that of the narrator's. In the first, there is the world of the rich planters with whom the narrator is associated. This group—along with our narrator in the role of an urban onlooker—observes the hunt carried on by the unusual and humorous character. Right from the start, "the difference between him and ordinary men was visible at a glance" (Thorpe 48). In the same manner, the educated, literate narrator along with the other travelers on the steamboat 'Invincible' in "The Big Bear of Arkansas" are set apart from the colorful frontier character Jim Doggett, who comes from a different world with a contrasting lifestyle.

Not only is the frontier character set apart from the others in the tale, but the frontiersman in Thorpe's sketches also excels in his own world in comparison with other frontier personages. When danger faces Tom and his followers on the bee hunt, it is Tom alone who remains to encounter the threatening danger as the others cowardly retreat. Even his helper, Sambo, is unable to remain and face the wrath of the enemy, leaving the 'sublime Tom' by himself and to whom alone the glory of the hunt belongs (50-51). Thorpe seriously presents this heroic character whom we continuously remember to be a bee hunter while simultaneously diminishing the acts of the other characters. Rather than weakening it, the serious presentation strengthens the character study in a humorous manner as Thorpe leads the reader to see the bee hunter from a new perspective—that of a heroic warrior battling alone against a deadly enemy. Tom Owen gains greatness as the reader goes deeper into the character.

Likewise, Jim Doggett is not merely a bear hunter, but "the best bear hunter in my district" (85). On one bear hunt, he is accompanied by another hunter whom he considers a hunting 'greenhorn.' Jim is unfortunately unable to fire because his gun snaps while Bill shoots, but achieves nothing out of it (88-89). The difference between Jim and Bill contributes to Thorpe's heroic delineation of the frontier character. The author achieves this by presenting Bill's failure to shoot as a result of a

human error—that of the inability to hit the target—while Jim’s failure is due to a mechanical error in his gun and not to his hunting abilities. He places Jim above human error here, which helps in elevating him above the other frontier hunters.

Just as Tom Owen and Jim Doggett have reputations of being the best at their occupation, Mike Fink has established for himself a name

along the whole of the Ohio as a man who excelled his fellows in everything,—particularly in his rifle shot, which was acknowledged to be unsurpassed. Probably no man ever lived who could compete with Mike in the latter accomplishment (165).

The tale continues to prove this, as his best shot is able to separate an Indian’s scalp lock without harming the Indian:

A cry of exultation rose at the last evidence of the skill of Mike Fink—the exhibition of a shot that established his claim, indisputably, to the eminence he ever afterwards held—the unrivaled marksman of all the flat-boatmen of the Western waters (172).

Moreover, the frontiersman is always proud of his career. Even though he might be out of place in the world of civilization and societies, as Jim Doggett himself acknowledges, in his own world he carries deep pride in what he is, “the best bear hunter in my district; and that is a reputation as much harder to earn than to be reckoned first man in Congress” (85). In his own way, Jim is a superior pioneer in the world of the frontier wilderness, and it is a reputation that he strives hard to achieve, not one that he attains easily.

Thorpe’s sketches of hunting “portrayed the necessary skill of the roving frontiersmen and squatters of the backwoods” (50). In one sketch “Wild Turkey Hunting,” Thorpe remarks that the number of the wild turkeys is not lessened by any natural forces but by “the skill of the pioneer and backwoodsman” (10). Just as the characters in the other sketches are the best in their profession, likewise, this tale is about a wild turkey hunter who “of all turkey-hunters, our friend W— is the most experienced, With him, it is a science reduced to certainty” (18).

In some of the sketches, Thorpe provides a description of the clothes of the backwoodsman, as he believes that it offers insight into the essence of being a frontier character. In his definition of the frontier character, he

explains the manner of clothing that the boatmen wore as “the dress studies for comfort, rather than fashion” (164). Tom Owen shows indifference to the fashionable clothing of the men around him as the reader is presented with a colorful description of his attire,

His head was adorned with an outlandish pattern of a hat—his nether limbs were encased by a pair of inexpressibles, beautifully fringed by the briar-bushes through which they were often drawn; coats and vests, he considered as superfluties (48).

Nevertheless, on the social level, the frontiersman has a very sociable personality and is liked wherever he goes. Thorpe shows how people are usually unwillingly attracted to this unique American figure. At the beginning, when he appears, the Big Bear [Jim] makes himself comfortable, and familiarly greets the other passengers of the cabin; some are annoyed at first, but are soon won over by the charm of the frontier character as they gather around him and he becomes the center of attention,

There was something about the intruder that won the heart on sight. His eyes were . . . good-natured to simplicity. Then his perfect confidence in himself was irresistibly droll (74-75).

The passengers don't realize the exact moment in which they are drawn to his charm. Tom is even able to gain the admiration of the narrator who “had the pleasure of seeing Tom Owen,” and later on is drawn “within the circle of his influence, and I at once became one of his most ready followers” (48, 49).

Thorpe's presentation of Jim Doggett as a frontiersman goes further than the other characters in a very significant way. Jim is characterized through language as Thorpe uses the vernacular to portray a true representation of this “peculiar American character.” This is further contrasted with the formal diction used by the narrator in the very same sketch. The vernacular plays a major role in expressing the imaginative, colorful world that the character inhabits. In the wilderness, there is no place for stiff, formal diction whereas the inventive picturesque language appropriately suits the tales Jim tells his audience. The two worlds contrast as,

The change from the factual to the imaginative in the 'elegant prose is paralleled by a movement from the moderately informal diction to the commonplaces of vernacular speech in which the imaginative figures more and more (Blair, 1953: 432).

It would be quite difficult to imagine hearing the same tales about mosquitoes, turkeys and the soil in Arkansas in the speech form of the educated narrator. It certainly would not be as colorful or as lively without images such as "a gun being an epidemic among bear" or "a dog knowing a bear's way as well as a horse-jockey knows a woman's" (Thorpe 78). The role of the vernacular is essential in connecting Jim as a frontier character to the special environment which Thorpe wishes to show as uniquely American,

The uniqueness of Jim's appearance and of his diction ties him up with the unique world of Cypress Forks and helps to contrast that world with the heterogeneous steamboat world (Blair, 1953: 434).

Although not to the same degree, the colorful vernacular is also present in "Mike Fink." Whenever Mike uses images to express himself, the influence of the wilderness is reflected in his words. He uses images that would not be found in the speech of characters who emerge from the cities. Without any Indians to fight or to declare war on, Mike explains that he would "grow as poor as a starved wolf in a pitfall" (167), or would become "as musty as an old swamp moccasin" (177). These expressions certainly differ from the plain, formal and straightforward language with which the narrator relates the tale. Rickels refers to the importance that the vernacular held not only to the fictitious characters, but also to the Southwestern writers as "this traditional vocabulary. . . enabled them to create their unique vision of backwoods America, to celebrate its energy and vitality" (Inexpressibles 82). By using the exact vernacular, Thorpe has unwittingly contributed to recording a side of the American dialect that might have been eternally lost were it not for his sketches revealing the joyful imagery of that time through the precise words spoken by the frontiersmen then.

After portraying his frontier characters in a heroic light, one questions whether Thorpe wishes to present them as fictional imaginary figures? To prevent his readers from committing the mistake of seeing these characters completely from that perspective, the author gives each character some humanizing traits which bring them down from the level

to which they have risen, thus putting them on the same level as other characters. This, in turn, repeatedly reminds readers that they are faced with people, not figments of the author's imagination.

Perhaps Tom Owen would have remained above the others, but for the fact that he is a mere bee-hunter. In this sketch, the object being hunted is the thing that really brings Tom down from a heroic level. Even though hunting was considered to be a frontier occupation, readers are still faced with the fact that he is hunting a bee, a mere insect, no matter how painful its sting may be. The object, which Tom hunts, reminds the readers that Tom is not really as heroic as Julius Caesar, a true conqueror of men. In the end, Thorpe's heroic description of the bee hunt takes on an ironic manner.

On reading "The Big Bear of Arkansas," one is faced with a folk tale of a mystical hunt. Thorpe is eager for the reader not to mix up Jim Doggett with folklore and tall tales, but rather to remember that there is a realistic touch in these characters as he merges realism and local color with folk fantasies. Rickels (1962:59) presents a suggestion of how the reader should approach Thorpe's character:

Doggett is not a folk creation. He is a character realistically and formally constructed for the literate and sophisticated audiences of the New York *Spirit of the Times*. He is one of the folk and consequently, through his character, the folk element enters the tale.

Although Jim's stories are recognized as folk tales that present incredible incidents, it does not affect the way in which Jim is to be seen. He remains on a human level and the reader still pictures him as a realistic person living in that period, even though he is a fictional creation of the author's mind. Although Thorpe raises him to the heroic level, Jim is brought back down by the humanizing traits which he is given. For example, at the most serious moment of the hunt, Jim is tripped up by his inexpressibles, which could occur to any other person in his situation at that time (92). Another way in which we are reminded that he is a mere human is the common aspect he shares with his audience in that the death of the bear is a mystery to them all. There are things in nature that are beyond even Jim's understanding regardless of the fact that he is a frontier character.

No matter how remarkable Mike Fink's rifle-shot may be, one cannot reject the fact that it came as a result of a human trait—that of pride in selfishness. Mike wishes to prove himself before the others, regardless of what the consequences might be. His shot indirectly results supposedly in the death of one of his friends and in a senseless fight between the boatmen and a group of Indians. He cares about “the nation” of the Indians for the sake of the pleasure of desolating them more than the real reason that has brought about the fight.

Therefore, the de-heroizing traits given to the characters connect them with the reality of the world in which Thorpe's audience exists. Instead of remaining remote, mythical and heroic untouchable people, they become realistic, lifelike characters who differ from the readers only because they live in the unsettled frontier lands of America. Thus, throughout the frontier character presentations, Thorpe recurrently reminds the readers that his fictional creations are human beings just like the rest; however, they live a different lifestyle as a result of the environment around them. Thorpe merely occupies the position of reporting what the Western man was like during that era.

Thorpe's primary wish to depict the frontiersman is followed by his secondary concern in presenting the significance which the American wilderness had in creating this type of character. Here lives the true American, far from the influence of European civilization. Developing out of the wilderness around him, he is an integral part of it as Thorpe explains in the preface to his work, “There are growing up, in these primitive wilds, men, whose daily life and conversation, when detailed, form exaggerations; but whose histories are, after all, only the natural developments of the mighty associations which surround them” (6). The characters consistently connect their existence with nature, reflecting a deep romantic love for nature and any aspect which conflicts with nature conflicts with their very being. The frontiersman does not object to any part of nature as Jim explains, “But mosquitoes is natur[sic] and I never find fault with her” (77). While a Yankee may be greatly pestered by these insects, the frontiersman is not affected. This is also part of the respect which the backwoodsman holds for nature, as he does not come up against it, rather he moves along with it. What nature wants is what Jim wants, “natur[sic] intended Arkansaw for a hunting ground, and I go according to natur[sic]” (82). The narrator himself realizes this relationship as he describes Jim as one of the “children of the wood” (93) whereas the narrator and others like him become aliens to this romantic

environment. Another lover of nature is Mike who, wild and uncultivated as he is, "had a soul that sometimes felt, while admiring it [nature], an exalted enthusiasm" (166).

Along with this love, the backwoodsman portrays an objection to the encroachments of civilization and the progress of settling the frontier, which were destroying the very wilderness that had made these men the heroes they were. Part of Jim's objection to farming lies in the fact that he sees it as a form of settlement, which could endanger his very existence (81-82). Mike looks back nostalgically to the good old days as he notices the destruction which improvement was inflicting upon his world in the wilderness and the threat it poses to him:

What's the use of improvements? When did cutting down trees make deer more plenty? Who ever found wild buffalo or a brave Indian in a city? Where's the fun, the frolicking, the fighting? Gone! Gone! The rifle won't make a man a living now--. If forests continue to be used up, I may yet be smothered in a settlement. (167)

The best example of the relationship between the frontiersman and nature is reflected in the confrontation between Jim Doggett and the bear, a spirit of nature. Jim exists as a part of two worlds. At the same time that he is a man like the others on the steamboat, he is a product of the wilderness which has created him. Simoneaux explains this position, "He is not like the refined, civilized men to whom he tells the tale of the bear hunt. Symbolically, he stands at a midpoint between the world of men and the world of the bear" (244). The bear is a symbol of the nature which faces the frontiersman daily. As such, it is a force to be reckoned with—not ignored. The harsh opposition of nature on the American character is made even stronger as the hunt becomes more intense. The bear rises above the natural and gains a mystical characteristic belonging to the supernatural as he is likened to the devil.

Nature is not all that it seems, even to the frontier character who is one of its products. In some aspects of the world of nature, there is no place for man, even for the '[child] of the wood' (Thorpe 93). With the death of the bear, Doggett is forced to reflect anew on the nature of his environment and he comes to the realization that some elements of nature are not for man's knowledge or understanding regardless of how proximate he may be to nature. Simoneaux explains that on a deeper level, the bear hunt turns into a quest in which the man is "fighting for

equal footing on natural ground with the bear, whose world he has invaded" (244). Just as Doggett cannot completely merge into the worlds of the *Invincible* or New Orleans, he cannot become a complete part of nature. The superiority of this world is especially shown in the fact that Doggett is not the real killer of the bear, who dies "when his time come" (Thorpe 92).

The relationship between nature and the frontier character suggests another concept on which critics have speculated. While Jim Doggett, Mike Fink and Tom Owen are seen as creations of the frontier wilderness with which they associate and sympathize, critics also see them as the violators of this very wilderness. Littlefield (1969:58) explains this contrary idea as he remarks on the sketches:

Most contain descriptions of personages who destroy the wilderness from which they draw the very essence of the American character. . . one finds scenes of the wanton destruction of the forests and of blood and carnage as animals are slaughtered, usually for sport.

Littlefield is of the opinion that Tom Owen portrays a lack of reverence as he chops down the finest trees in the forest just for the sake of his enjoyment in bee hunting. The chopping down of trees was one of the major marks of civilization on nature since the process of settling down was initiated with this very first step. Littlefield explains that Tom sees the trees as existing only for the bees to hive there so that he, in turn, can cut them down. This view is also shared by the narrator. However, one may argue that Thorpe himself was not of this opinion completely. He expresses his view when he talks about Tom's work in an essay he wrote titled "Reminiscences of Tom Owen, the Bee-Hunter." Thorpe does not deny that the trees are majestic, but they also present a threat to the people as they attain a dangerous height, a threat that is obliterated by Tom at the same time that he makes them more beautiful. Therefore, some good can be achieved in cutting them down:

Under such circumstances, to avoid the catastrophe of having these giants thrown down by a storm, to the damage of what is nestled in their shade, they must either be cut down, or have their lordly crowns shorn from their brows. It was Tom Owen's business to deprive them of their glory, rendering them not only useful, but changing their form to the beautiful instead of the grand. (qtd. in Keller, 1979:95)

In "Summer Retreat in Arkansas," the reader is presented with an example of how the Arkansas hunter contemplates the forest and the plants around him and what they mean to him:

The forest, the waste, and the dangers of the canebrake, but add to the excitement of the Arkansas hunter; he conquers them all, and makes them subservient to his pursuits The noblest trees to him are only valuable for fence rails (Thorpe 30).

Rather than viewing the elements of nature through a romantic eye, reflecting admiration and reverence for the beauty of the trees, the narrator merely sees them from a practical perspective for what utilitarian existence they may offer to man.

Moreover, at the same time that Mike's rifle shot proves his excellence as a rifleman, the story can be seen from a different perspective. Rickels (1962) describes the tale as "a realistic account of one of those deeds of senseless brutality observed occasionally in the careers of the frontiersmen" (Thorpe 67-68). One wonders, what did Mike really accomplish with that shot? The Indian Proud Joe has been degraded in various ways and the only thing of real importance which remains for him is the ornament of the scalp-lock that he cherishes and takes great care of. However, this is also taken away from him by Mike's senseless act of shooting it off, just to prove his reputation. Even Mike's nostalgia for the old days and his regret about oncoming civilization are affected by selfishness (Thorpe 167). His relationship to nature is not so much a rapport with nature as a means to fulfill his personal needs. The major threat of the encroachment of civilization on the setting and the animals in the wilderness does not worry him so much as the fact that his own existence will be affected and the pleasure he achieves through hunting animals and Indians will be gone:

If the Choctaws or Cherokees on the Massassip don't give us a brush as we pass along, I shall grow as poor as a starved wolf in a pitfall. I must, to live peaceably, point my rifle at something, more dangerous than varmint. Six months and no fight, would spile me worse than a 'tack of rheumatism. (167)

Instead of relating to the primitive savages of the wilderness, he eagerly hopes to come in contact with them in order to kill them and destroy their very presence in the nature to which they have as much a right as he has.

Furthermore, the bear hunt also contributes to this theme as the bear is the spirit of nature and its death symbolizes the death of nature and the passing away of the wilderness. Instead of a union between nature and him, Doggett is, in reality, "The ultimate violator of nature, a man whose primary function is to kill" (Lemay, 1975: 329). Lemay believes that Thorpe does not completely approve of hunting and that beneath the surface lies a different opinion:

A disgust for the act of slaughter, a disgust with the necessary end of the wilderness, and by implication, a disgust with the nature of man who is necessarily opposed to nature, as well as a regret for the fall of man, symbolized by the killing of the bear, which marks the end of the reign of the Eden-li wilderness of the Old Southwest. (333)

These critics regret that these frontiersmen have to survive at the cruel expense of destroying the very thing which created them and made them figures of importance in American literature. Thus, Thorpe's volume of sketches is seen to represent an indictment of the destruction of nature and a lament for the passing of the wilderness frontier. It is also a lament that it was not the beauty and magnificence of nature that shaped American character, but rather the concept of nature as an object to be tamed or destroyed (Littlefield, 1969: 65). Consequently, Thorpe comes to present, in a new manner, the frontier characters in relation to the environment. Even though they may be the result of the wilderness around them and were once "children of the woods," there comes a time when they turn against that very nature to which they are indebted for their existence and they become mere humans exploiting nature around them to serve their own desires and needs.

This nature/frontier dialectic takes additional dimension when Thorpe delineates another kind of backwoods character who can be found in sketches such as "Major Gasden's Story" and "A Piano in Arkansas." Here, the frontier characters are placed within the circle of society, instead of out in the open wilderness on the borders of civilization. They are seen in a different light as Thorpe presents a gentle satire on frontier village life and the pretensions of backwoods ignorance. For example, on Major Gasden's first visit to New Orleans, his mistake of sitting at a private dinner party while he believed it to be a hotel is due to his ignorance of the customs of the city. In the second sketch, the village folks of Hardscrabble are ignorant of what a piano is, believing it to be an

animal until one of them named Mo Mercer boastfully clarifies that it is a musical instrument. Later on, Mo's mistake in pointing to a washing machine as the piano reveals his own ignorance in the matter.

However, Thorpe does not attack these characters in order to bring about any kind of reform. He simply wishes to reveal another type of backwoods character and amuse his readers. Thorpe continues in the tradition of the literature of the Old Southwest, which did not aim at trying to bring about any kind of reform. Rickels (1962:65) describes Thorpe's sketch "A Piano in Arkansas" as "the first elaborate social comedy by one of the Southwestern humorists to exploit what was eventually to become the legendary ignorance of the Arkansawyer"

Nevertheless, there is some difference between the ignorance of the three men who are all frontier personages. Both Major Gasden and Jim Doggett reflect an innocent ignorance. They are unacquainted with the civilized rules of large towns or cities, nor do they pretend to know so as they both frankly admit. When Jim Doggett narrates his visit to New Orleans where he misunderstands the talk of the New Orleans gentlemen, he humbly admits that perhaps he is 'green' there. He himself is of the opinion that they are the "real know-nothings" (Thorpe 75). Major Gasden later narrates his "amusing mistake" in good humor, laughing along with his listeners rather than shamefully trying to hide the incident (Thorpe 279). Both characters do not attempt to relate themselves to that kind of life whatsoever, whereas Mo Mercer differs from them. Mo is not willing to admit his ignorance in front of the village people and he tries to relate himself to the other world represented by the new family by pretending to know what a piano is. His affectation is an attempt to escape from the frontier village life to which he belongs and to enter the sophisticated life influenced by civilization and European values. Mo tries to separate himself from his original background by trying to establish some common knowledge between him and the new family, which would set him apart from the rest of the village folk. Even before the embarrassing piano incident, Mo's wish to relate himself to a life other than that of the frontier village reveals itself as the narrator explains that ". . . Mo bragged extensively upon his having been to the 'Capital' twice,—of his there having been in the most 'fashionable society,'—of having seen the world" (148).

No matter how the reader goes about viewing *The Hive of "The Bee-Hunter,"* it cannot be denied that Thorpe contributed, to a large degree, in establishing a unique American character as he colorfully presents the frontiersmen of the American wilderness during the ante-bellum years. His characters are drawn in a realistic, yet humorous manner, with such amusing incidents that they greatly attract the attention of those interested in knowing what the real frontier character in the wilderness was like before the flow of European influence and civilization appeared and left its mark, erasing the true frontier essence from his being.

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