

Animal Maltreatment in Human Entertainment in *Horse Heaven*

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Abstract

As one of her well-known works, Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven* draws our attention to the fate of thoroughbreds at the racetrack. Through some typical cases of horse maltreatment in different situations, Smiley uncovers cruel facts about human entertainment involving animals. For some people, animals are just instruments to get fortune, fame, or fun, while their needs, health, value, dignity, and life are neglected. Doubtlessly, Smiley intends to criticize animal cruelty in human entertainment, and calls for our care for nonhuman animals.

Key words: Maltreatment; Human entertainment; Thoroughbreds; Instrumentalization

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1. INTRODUCTION

Animals have been employed in human entertainment for quite a long time. They appear widely in the entertainment industry, such as in circuses, cock-, dog-, and bullfighting, rodeos, dog- and horse-racing, zoos, aquaria, movies, and television shows. It is by no means a rare case for animals to be ill-treated in these activities. Gary L. Francione reveals that "Animals used in entertainment are often forced to endure lifelong incarceration and confinement, poor living conditions, extreme physical danger and hardship, and brutal treatment" (Francione, 2000, p.xxi).

In Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven*, animal cruelty in horse-racing is revealed through some horse mistreatment cases. In the horse racing industry, horses encounter various ill-treatment due to certain people's instrumentalization of horses for maximum interests. To their mind, horses are only machines deserving no care or respect. That's why Henry, an old horse trainer who works at the track for decades, laments the cruelty to horses— "The things I've seen men do to horses made me believe in sin, original and every other kind. And when I die, and that isn't so far away now, I expect to be punished for the sins I looked upon but didn't stop. But what I'm telling you is, that's the wages of a life at the track. You don't say everything you know" (Smiley, 2000, p.19)¹. However, the previous research doesn't focus enough on the maltreatment of horses in the novel. Through the following horse maltreatment cases, it isn't difficult to find out Smiley's anti-instrumentalist view towards animals as well as human-animal relationship.

2. MALTREATMENT OF THOROUGHBREDS BY BUDDY CRAWFORD IN *HORSE HEAVEN*

There are seven horse-trainers in *Horse Heaven*, among whom three of them are under the most detailed description of their attitudes towards horses. They are Farley Jones, Buddy Crawford, and Deirdre Donohue. Buddy seems to be the best horse-trainer among them, for his win ratio is 25 percent. Nonetheless, Jane Smiley discloses what is behind Buddy's high win ratio. Different from Farley and Deirdre who treat horses with care and conscience, Buddy scarcely cares about horses' welfare. The horses often fall victim to his crazy desire for high

¹ All the quotations from the novel are from the version: Smiley, Jane. (2000). *Horse heaven*. New York: Ballantine Books.; hereafter the quotations from the novel will be only marked by page number.

win ratio. Buddy continues his immoral treatment of horses even after he converts to Christianity and feels tortured by the conflicts between his desire and his belief. Buddy's philosophy is to cull the herd. In his own words, "You don't get a Cigar by babying every horse and coddling every jockey. You get a Cigar by getting rid of whoever doesn't want to win, horse or man, jockey or owner" (p.60). Trying his best to win is the only way for him to ensure financial gains. Horses are made full use of for his ambition to become rich and famous.

According to Oliver, Farley's assistant trainer who works for Buddy for four months, "wicked" is a better word for Buddy Crawford than the other words most frequently used to describe him by other trainers, grooms who could speak English, jockeys, and jockey agents, such as "maniac", "butcher", "madman," "jerk", or "shit". Oliver doesn't agree with Buddy on his handling of horses, such as pin-firing horses' ankles, keeping toe-grabs on all of the horses irrespective of an increase in the chances of breakdown on the track, galloping horses that are sore, and running early two-year-olds.

Buddy's first inhumane deed to Thoroughbreds is pin firing, also called thermocautery. It is the treatment of a horse's leg injury by burning, freezing, or dousing it with acid or caustic chemicals. Even though pin firing is obsolete for it causes great pain to horses, Buddy still sticks to the old barbaric way without any consideration to horses' wellbeing. His purpose is to quicken the healing process so that horses can go back to the track to make money as soon as possible. In fact, there are some other methods that are more humane to help horses recover than pin firing, but Buddy chooses the one that costs him the least whereas tortures horses the most.

Buddy's second cruel deed to Thoroughbreds is using toe grabs on them even after the research shows that it will add risks to Thoroughbreds' health. A toe grab is a raised rim on the toe area of a horseshoe to reduce slipping on the track. Nevertheless, it will exert tremendous stresses on horses' limbs. Some studies discover that toe grabs are one of the main causes of Thoroughbreds' breaking down at the track. For example, Pat Tearney argues that "G.W. Pratt ...concluded that toe grabs, fatigue and racetrack surfaces were the primary cause of racehorses breaking down...In essence, they found that while toe grabs might give more traction, they also put much more stress on forelegs" (Tearney, 2005). It's clear that Buddy's insistence on toe grabs is for an increase in Thoroughbreds' speed. Although he does know the harm brought by toe grabs, he doesn't care if they are in danger as long as the winning percentage gets boosted.

Buddy's third merciless deed to Thoroughbreds is galloping them despite their soreness. Even when horses are suffering from various pains, Buddy still forces them to the track, just like Oliver's angry question of Buddy's conversion to Christianity— "But, looking into Buddy's beaming face, he found himself wondering about

justice and deserving and a hundred horses here and at Hollywood Park who could barely walk but were made to run every five days, week after week, month after month" (p.103). In Buddy's group, there is no time for horses to recover fully before their next racing, as a result of which many horses collapse on account of fatigue and exhaustion.

Buddy's fourth mistreatment of Thoroughbreds is running early two-year-olds, whose growth plates haven't closed yet. Following his culling theory, Buddy regards the two-year-olds as the base of the pyramid in order to take full advantage of the resources. Nevertheless, there exists great danger for the two-year-olds. According to a famous American animal rights organization named PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), "their skeletal systems are still growing and are unprepared to handle the pressures of running on a hard track at high speeds...Strained tendons or hairline fractures can be tough for veterinarians to diagnose, and the damage may go from minor to irreversible at the next race or workout" ("The Horseracing Industry"). Despite the damaging consequences, Buddy never gives up running two-year-olds.

As a matter of fact, Buddy himself is very clear that he is doing something wrong. With his conversion to Christianity, Buddy is tortured mentally by the contradiction between his desire for track interests and his conscience about maltreating horses. His inner conflict fully reveals what is right and what is wrong:

Jesus did not allow you to run a two-year-old whose growth plates hadn't closed. Jesus didn't allow you to run an unfit horse. Jesus didn't allow any toe-grabs or turndowns. Jesus didn't allow you even to think about buzzing the horse's neck with a hot electrical device to remind him that he hadn't arrived at the finish line yet. What Jesus liked, Buddy quickly discovered, was a fair race—no gimmicks, no drugs, no subtle interference on the part of jockeys. No trying to evade the rules. And the thing about Jesus, as everyone who had ever been to Sunday school knew, was that, unlike track officials, he couldn't be fooled (pp.130-131).

The ironic thing is that Buddy goes on playing tricks at the track even though he knows that Jesus forbids it. Faced with temptation, Buddy chooses to follow desire rather than doctrine. In order to win races, he believes that there must be some sacrifices. For him, it won't be more appropriate than sacrificing nonhuman animals.

In addition to the above misdeeds, Buddy also commits some other crimes, among which using drugs on horses is the most serious one. With almost one hundred horses in his barn, Buddy has several veterinarians, one of whom named Curtis Doheny is a crooked vet. Buddy often colludes with Curtis in dealing with horses in a merciless way. For instance, to meet Buddy's requirement, Curtis injects Marcaine into wounded horses to block a joint so that the horses will feel no pain. Besides Marcaine, he also uses such drugs as Sublimaze on horses. Moreover, Curtis will cut horses' nerve above their knees so that

they don't feel their tendon or suspensory ligament any longer. In the novel, there're two typical drug treatments of Thoroughbreds, in which horses are exploited as instruments and treated as machines without any feeling.

The first one is Buddy's hormonal program. To mitigate the aggressiveness of a colt named Epic Steam, a progesterone implant is inserted in the colt's neck underneath his mane secretly. However, the side effect is horrible. The colt becomes more and more uneasy and one day kills a cat violently in his stall—"He picked it up by the neck and threw it against the wall" (p.244). On top of that, the colt once tries to attack a filly named Residual. He runs after the filly crazily with an intention to bite her. The hormonal treatment aims at strengthening the colt's self-control during the racing to increase the win ratio, but it worsens his health by breaking the natural law. The colt becomes the victim of humans' greed and cruelty.

Another case is Buddy's training the filly Residual for big racing events like the Breeders' Cup. The filly is injected with different medicines for a guarantee and even an improvement of her performance. "Residual, on steroids, progesterone, and regular shots of hyaluronic acid to her joints, was running like a machine. She was feeling like a machine, too" (p.480). Under Buddy's manipulation, the filly is deprived of a natural growth and recovering. The consequence is the filly's deteriorating health condition with more and more drugs into her body. Residual's owner Andrea knows Buddy is doing something to the horse for the Breeders' Cup, but she understands it as Buddy's job and doesn't interfere. In reality, Andrea and her husband Jason are too wealthy to care about how much profitability their five horses trained by Buddy can bring. However, fun is too important to miss, and the Breeders' Cup is the most fun of all.

Ten days before the Breeders' Cup, Curtis gives the filly a series of Epogen injections, altogether four, and also an injection into the joint capsule of her knee. Finally, Residual runs the first and Buddy wins the Breeders' Cup. However, long time's drug treatment plus extreme pressure and tiredness deteriorate Residual's health. The look on the filly's face after the race is described by Buddy as "beyond exhausted, beyond afraid. She was done for" (p.614). Soon after the race, the filly is found seriously sick. According to the vet, the filly gets a raging case of pleuropneumonia, and it is hard to save her. Residual helps her human owner and trainer win a large sum of money, but she herself loses health, hope, and even life. She is treated by Buddy like nothing but a running machine without feeling and thought. Her pathetic fate is the best proof of humans' cruelty.

In brief, Buddy's high win percentage is achieved at the cost of one equine health after another. Under his culling theory, the Thoroughbreds are squeezed to the last drop of their blood. For many times Buddy is pricked by his conscience, but a pursuit for big fame and fortune outweighs his poor conscience. He chooses benefits rather

than benevolence. Buddy's case reminds us that behind humans' seemingly great achievements hide so many sacrifices of nonhuman animals who suffer from all kinds of maltreatment.

3. THOROUGHBREDS' SUFFERINGS WITNESSED BY DEIRDRE IN *HORSE HEAVEN*

Deirdre Donohue is the only woman horse trainer in the novel. The bloody scenes she sees in horse racing torture her conscience and drive her farther and farther away from the track. Finally, she leaves the track and changes another job. It is through Deirdre's eyes that cruel happenings on the track are uncovered.

The most obvious one is an accident taking place during a horse racing. A line of twelve horses start their race, including the horse named Mighty Again trained by Deirdre. Unfortunately, the leading runner stumbles and flips, landing on his side crosswise in the path. Three of the following horses fall down one by one in the next ten seconds, just like dominoes. The rest of the horses go around or pull to the outside of the track. Deirdre blames herself for this accident and feels sympathetic for the wounded horses. From her prayer, we can find Deirdre's inner remorse—"Hail Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, us horse-trainers, who have brought these poor beasts to this pass. Make their suffering short and show them your mercy. Amen" (p.149).

Mighty Again is one of the fallen horses. He lies on his side, his eyes are rimmed with white out of fear, and his lips are slightly parted. Before long Mighty Again "was still breathing, but his breaths were noisy and labored. His eye was now closed" (p.150). It turns out that his left shoulder is smashed, and there is a long gash along his rib cage that is dented, as well. Both the vet and Deirdre have to accept a cruel fact that "He's a goner" (p.151). Mighty Again and another horse whose leg is broken will be euthanized after a negotiation with their owners. On the track, the front-runner is nearly dead, the fourth horse lies there with broken neck. The loss of Mighty Again and other horses is a blow to Deirdre, for "The physical enormity of death was too much for her—too much blood, too much bone, too many rasping breaths, too much sweat and stink too suddenly" (p.151). Facing another round of deaths at the track, Deirdre can't bear the bloodiness anymore. Her reflection on the horse racing industry is tormenting everyone's conscience:

But horses are tragic beasts, especially good horses, especially good Thoroughbreds. ...there's always a moment in a race when a horse has to decide to press on. A Thoroughbred is likelier than not to press on. That's what we ask of them. But, I ask myself, at what cost? We rely on them not to consider the cost, but to press on anyway. That's heart, you know. They have great hearts. But it's their downfall, that they don't feel the cost until they've paid it. (p.296)

For Deirdre, the biggest cost of horse racing is the potential sufferings of Thoroughbreds, which whips her heart and all those who are involved. Thoroughbreds are born runners with enthusiasm and courage. However, their talents are taken advantage of by humans to earn money and reputation. The Thoroughbreds are forced to keep on racing even if they are sore and exhausted. Accordingly, the accident rates soar, putting countless racing horses at risk. More often than not, a horse's unexpected fall in a fierce race involves several other horses. Too many people choose to be blind to horses' pains and sufferings, and abandon them if they're not useful and profitable any more. There's no communication between humans and horses in that kind of relationship, in which horses are only treated like machines and tools. The injuries and deaths of innocent animals are the cost of money-driven human entertainment. In short, Deirdre's sympathy for suffering horses and her revelation of humans' cruel exploitation of horses draw our attention to the living condition of animals in human entertainment industry, and arouse our rethinking of the cost of extreme instrumentalization of animals.

4. MISTREATMENT OF HORSES OBSERVED BY JOY AND HORACIO IN HORSE HEAVEN

In addition to the horse sufferings witnessed by Deirdre, the mistreatment of horses is also described through the other characters' eyes, such as Joy Gorham and Horacio Delagarza.

4.1 Bucky Lord's Neglect of Horses Witnessed by Joy Gorham

Joy Gorham is the mare manager at Tompkins Ranch, The Breeding Operation, which is a subsidiary of Tompkins Worldwide Racing. At the early beginning of *Horse Heaven*, horse maltreatment is reported in a letter written by an eleven-year-old girl named Audrey to Tompkins. It happens that Joy reads the letter. The letter is concerned with saving a horse named Mr. T (his official name is Terza Rima). Mr. T once runs for Tompkins Racing for five years and wins seven races out of fifty-two starts. After that, he is sold to Bucky Lord. Bucky Lord mistreats horses by neglecting them, starving them and even beating them. In the letter, Audrey writes about the owner of Mr. T as this: "He is a bad man, and last summer he forgot to fill the tanks for three days when it was hot. My Mom and I filled the tanks ourselves, with a hose from the school. He thinks the horses are eating the grass, but there isn't any grass. All the horses are very unhappy" (p.24). Since Audrey is about to move to another city, she worries about Mr. T and turns to his former owner Tompkins for help.

Under Joy's arrangement, Mr. T is bought back from Bucky Lord and brought back to Tompkins Ranch. What Joy sees at the first sight of Mr. T proves how awfully Mr. T is treated by Bucky Lord:

Joy found the gelding's condition startling, almost an optical illusion. ...His feet were a mess, cracked and uneven from bad shoeing or no shoeing, whichever would be worse. His skeletal structure stood out like a picture from a manual. His spine ran from his withers to his tail, bony and prominent. The saddest part was his haunches. The atrophied muscles fell away from the spine in hollows; the croup, that rounded, shining world of power in a fit horse, was an unsoftened rocky prominence in this guy. (pp.25-26)

From the pathetic physical condition of Mr. T, there is no doubt that he suffers from long-time starvation and neglect. He is even deprived of the basic needs of drinking and eating. Bucky Lord takes it for granted that the horses can eat grass, but he doesn't notice that there's no grass. He even forgets to fill the tanks for three days in hot summer, which would cause horses' dehydration and sickness if without Audrey's timely help. Obviously, Bucky Lord doesn't go to see the horses every day, not to mention taking care of them. Bucky Lord's neglect of the horses' needs stems from a deeper neglect of animals' moral agency in the industrialized farming and commercialized entertaining systems. Different from Audrey, Bucky Lord has no personal communication with horses. For him, horses don't deserve much attention and care, for they are just commodities ready to sell. Mr. T's terrible physical condition is doubtlessly an accusation of Bucky Lord's instrumentalization and maltreatment of animals.

4.2 The Fate of Horses Witnessed by Horacio Delagarza

In the novel, horses are sold and bought at auctions. The more possibility there is for a horse to win at the track, the higher his/her price will be. Horses' genealogy, their physical condition, their age, and their racing records all count at auctions. The higher interest a horse will bring, the more attention he/she will receive. With regard to the old or disabled horses, no matter how many prizes they once win and how much profits they once produce, they will all face the same fate— being sold at very low price to slaughterhouses and hence being killed for human consumption or made as dogfood or something else. That's why the ninth race (last race) on a racing day is called "dogfood run" by some, for the old geldings and mares will be arranged in that race. Their trainers and owners will extract the last drops of their investment before sending the animals away to slaughterhouses. Regarding this, Gary L. Francione notes that "When horses are no longer useful for racing, they are used for breeding or, as is usually the case, sold at auction for slaughter. Approximately 75 percent of all racehorses end up at the slaughterhouse;" (Francione, 2000, p.26).

Among the auctions, one auction most reveals the ill-treatment of horses through the eyes of Horacio Delagarza. Horacio helps his friend Angel Smith to trail seven horses over to the auction yard. He tells Angel's wife that he will wait for the horses to be sold and bring the money back to her. When Horacio gets horses off the

trailer and into the corral in the auction yard, he sees the guy from the slaughterhouse with the double-bottomed livestock trailer parked in the back of the parking lot. Horacio finds that “He came every week, and he always had enough money to go off with a full load, horses on the top shelf and horses on the bottom shelf, all bunched together, their heads down by their feet. It was a sight that Horacio hated to see, even though he wasn’t otherwise a pussy” (p.601). Every week, dozens of horses are sold at auctions and sent to slaughterhouses. When Horacio sits down waiting for the auction, he observes:

The buyers, even the ones who weren’t buying for slaughter, were a hard-bitten, un pitying bunch, Horacio thought. They were looking for useful animals who could get down to work right now. No pets, no projects. Horacio looked away from the corral. It was a bad lot in the corral. The slaughter man would fill up his truck for sure. (p.602)

According to Horacio, “Every horse had a buyer, and half the time the buyer was the slaughter man, whose voice rose out of the silence at the end of any bout of unsuccessful bidding and offered a couple hundred dollars. Bang, down came the gavel, and the slaughter man’s boy walked in and led the horse out to the double-bottomed trailer” (pp.602-603).

The final fates of these old or deformed horses at auctions are all the same. On their way to slaughter plants, they will suffer from jam-packed space as well as a lack of drink and food in a long-distance transportation. Some of the horses get injured or even killed during the transit. Furthermore, the slaughter of horses is brutal and terrifying— “Horses are skittish by nature (owing to their heightened fight-or-flight response), which makes accurate pre-slaughter stunning difficult. As a result, horses often endure repeated blows and sometimes remain conscious during dismemberment—this is rarely a quick, painless death” (“The Facts”).

Though horses have been forbidden to be slaughtered in the United States since 2007, they are still being exported to the slaughter plants in other countries for meat. Among the horses to be killed, “The Thoroughbred-racing industry sends an estimated 10,000 horses to slaughter annually, meaning that half of the 20,000 new foals born each year will eventually be killed for their flesh” (“Overbreeding”). As to the fate of racehorses, Bernard Rollin writes:

These racehorses are like house pets: They have been handled a great deal and will follow you around and nuzzle you. I pointed out that, aside from the immorality of selling them for a few hundred dollars, doing so is idiotic in that if it were widely known, it would turn society against racing. (Rollin, 2011, p.249)

Similar to Rollin, the welfare of the retired racehorses is one of Smiley’s concerns in *Horse Heaven*. Through Horacio’s observation of what happens at auctions, the fate of those once brilliant racehorses is uncovered. The horses are still being maltreated even during their last hours in the world. Horacio’s sympathy for the horses

implies Smiley’s concern for the welfare of those retired Thoroughbreds as well as her criticism of the inhumane ways of dealing with old and handicapped horses.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, by means of different characters’ perspectives of horses in *Horse Heaven*, horses’ condition in different aspects is exhibited to the reader. The horses suffer from all kinds of mistreatment in horse racing industry. With an aim to improve win percentage as well as fame and fortune, the horse trainer Buddy resorts to the injection of drugs with negative side effects, sticks to such obsolete savage ways as pin firing and putting toe grabs to treat horses, runs early two-year-old horses who are too young to bear high strength of racing, and gallops horses who are sore and exhausted. For the horse trainer Deirdre, horse racing is a high-risk activity at the cost of many precious lives of Thoroughbreds in the racing accidents. The seriously wounded horses in accidents have to be euthanized, and some horses die on the spot. Through the eyes of Joy, the neglect and abuse of horses are revealed, while through the eyes of Horacio, the fate of those old or handicapped horses at auctions is disclosed. In short, in human entertainment industry, animals are faced with the danger of being neglected and maltreated, acting as instruments for humans’ pursuit of fortune, fame, and fun. Through the horse maltreatment cases, Smiley criticizes the instrumentalist view of animals, and calls for humans’ care for nonhuman animals in entertainment industry.

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