

Trust and Attunement Between Thoroughbreds and Horsemen in *Horse Heaven*

WU Limin

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

American Pulitzer winner Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven* portrays Thoroughbreds not as passive objects of human control but as intelligent, capable, and responsive subjects who actively participate in human-animal interactions. Although existing scholarship has examined the novel from perspectives including brain science and horse-racing culture, insufficient attention has been paid to the role of interspecies cooperation and the corporeal communication through which horses and humans coordinate their actions. This paper examines four cases of cooperation between Thoroughbreds and horsemen in racing and training to explore how trust and attunement facilitate successful interspecies collaboration. Drawing on theories of dialogical interspecies ethics, the paper argues that Smiley represents interspecies communication as a multimodal, embodied process that extends beyond verbal language. Through bodily rhythms, tactile sensations, gestures, movements, and kinaesthetic responses, horses and humans perceive and adjust to one another, gradually developing mutual trust and corporeal attunement. More importantly, the four cases demonstrate that horses frequently assume an active, even leading, role in cooperation by exercising intelligence, judgment, initiative, adaptability, and competence. Smiley thus challenges anthropocentric assumptions that privilege human cognition and agency while reducing animals to objects of command and control. By contrasting cooperative relationships based on mutual trust and adjustment with practices of force and domination, *Horse Heaven* advocates a dialogical model of human-animal interaction founded on respect for animal subjectivity and responsiveness to animals on their own terms. The novel ultimately suggests that interspecies trust and attunement can transform hierarchical human-animal relations into reciprocal and ethically meaningful forms of cooperation.

Keywords: trust, attunement, interspecies cooperation, intercorporeal interaction, dialogical interspecies relationship

Introduction

In Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley's novel *Horse Heaven*, Thoroughbreds and horsemen cooperate a lot with each other, especially in horseracing and horse training. At the track Thoroughbreds and jockeys need to cooperate with each other in a variety of competitions. Off the track, horse trainers need to cooperate with Thoroughbreds in all kinds of exercises. In horseracing, Thoroughbreds are no less important than jockeys in

WU Limin, Ph.D., associate professor, School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

affecting the final result. It is from their cooperation that equine intelligence and competence are exhibited. As for a jockey's part, it is crucial for him or her to realize and respect that. Trust and attunement between horses and jockeys are of vital importance. It is the same with horse training. In fact, this kind of intercorporeal interaction between horses and jockeys is similar to "interkinaesthetic comportment" (Behnke, 1997, p. 181), which refers to "the ongoing adjustments of postures, gestures, actions made in relation to others, in human-human and human-animal interactions" (Warkentin, 2010, p. 110).

As for previous research on *Horse Heaven*, the interspecies cooperation receives insufficient discussion. Only several essays touch this topic. In her essay Bardsley creatively integrates brain science into the elaboration of the novel (2015, pp. 251-270). By disclosing the limbic system of horses and humans in a political and literary context, she gives a fresh picture of the neurotic adjustment underneath the interspecies interactions. However, the individuality and uniqueness of each animal still need further discovery. The dependence on brain science in the analysis, to a certain extent, narrows the interpretation of love between non-human animals and humans. A more comprehensive analysis is still needed. Another essay by Donald Pizer analyzes two novels about horse racing—Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven* and Jaimy Gordon's *Lord of Misrule* (2013, pp. 155-167). Though the article centers on horse racing, it makes an analysis of the main human and equine characters respectively, and there is not any detailed discussion about the horses' inner world and their interactions with humans.

Through analyzing four cases of interspecies cooperation in horse racing and training in *Horse Heaven*, the essay aims at digging out how equines and humans collaborate with each other, as well as trust and attunement between them, and thus synthesizes Smiley's interspecies ethics underneath the narration.

Trust and Attunement Between Justa Bob and Roberto in Horse Racing

The first case is concerned with the interspecies cooperation between Justa Bob and Roberto in horse racing. Roberto is a very young jockey without any race experience. His debut in horse racing starts from the cooperation with a Thoroughbred named Justa Bob. Unlike Roberto, Justa is an experienced racer with lots of starts, lots of finishes, some wins, and no accidents. Their first cooperation vividly illustrates the significance of mutual trust and attunement in interspecies interactions.

Around the beginning of the race Roberto feels a bit nervous, while Justa is quite relaxed. From the start, Roberto realizes the difference—"But Justa Bob sighed, strode in, stood still, shifted his weight backward, and leapt as soon as the bell clanged. From that moment on, Roberto felt that time was in the control of Justa Bob, no one else" (Smiley, 2000, p. 53). Justa runs steadily but rather slowly at the beginning, but Roberto does not get worried or impatient. All Roberto does is feel his mouth for him, to let him know that he is there. Roberto trusts Justa and does not want to interrupt his tempo.

Halfway around, Justa switches leads (which means he switches the leading leg from left to right or right to left), and digs in a bit, elongating his stride to surpass the fifth horse. Down the backstretch, when Roberto notices two horses bumping right in front of him, Justa switches leads again and outpaces another horse. Despite the noises around, Justa "held Roberto's hands with his mouth, steadily and calmly" (Smiley, 2000, p. 54). With a clear aim of reaching the finishing line, Justa is attentive and self-composed in front of all kinds of accidents and disruptions at the track. From Roberto's side, he is wondering whether Justa will choose to go

wide or slip through the space between horse number three and number two. When Roberto realizes that maybe he himself should make a decision, Justa already chooses the hole and slips through it. Due to his experience and intelligence, Justa always takes an initiative role in cooperation with his human partner during the racing.

When only one horse is in front of Justa with certain distance, Roberto thinks of resorting to his whip, but Justa “informed him in no uncertain terms that that would be unacceptable. He was a class or two above the company in this race, and to whip him would be insulting” (Smiley, 2000, p. 54). The messages are transmitted between them through their intercorporeal interactions. Justa feels Roberto’s intention via kinaesthetic signals, while Roberto also feels Justa’s response from their somatic interaction. Roberto has a full awareness of his equine partner’s subjectivity the moment he mounts him—“a long shining dark neck in front of you, two unique ears, and the feel of his mouth, his personality, really, right there in your hands” (p. 53). The two cooperators exchange ideas through their bodies and attune themselves to each other accordingly. That’s why when Roberto senses Justa’s objection, he gives up the whipping idea and continues to hold Justa’s mouth in his hands, “letting his own body stretch and fold with the rhythm of the horse” (p. 54). The intercorporeal communication and attunement to each other contribute to a smooth interspecies cooperation and the development of a dialogical interspecies relationship.

The interkinaesthetic interaction reaches the peak when the Thoroughbred and the jockey become one, in which both are as closely interconnected as an “embodiment” of each other (Birke & Brandt, 2009, p. 190). The horse and the jockey attune themselves to each other to such an extent that the two moving in the same rhythm merge into a whole. The harmonious interspecies cooperation continues, and Justa approaches the leading chestnut. Roberto can feel that Justa gages the distance and speeds up, but he does not quite know whether to continue trusting his equine partner’s judgment. At such a crucial time, Roberto hesitates for a second but finally chooses to follow his instincts and trust his equine partner to handle everything. What Justa does next proves that the trust and attunement are totally wise and worthwhile: “The wire was upon them, and just then Justa Bob stretched out his nose and stuck it in front of the chestnut’s nose” (Smiley, 2000, p. 54). Finally, Justa wins. Roberto is amazed at his partner’s discretion and tactic, and appreciates his leading role in winning the race. He wonders why such a bright and competent Thoroughbred does not win every match. The groom’s words are the best answer and lesson to him: “Some jocks can listen and some can’t” (p. 55). In the groom’s opinion, Justa knows how to make decisions wisely at the track, so the only difference exists in whether a jockey is willing and able to listen to the equine. Some jockeys are just ignorant of horses’ voices and blunt about corporeal signals. They trust themselves rather than animals; for in their eyes, animals are not as intelligent as they are or even have no intelligence at all. For instance, the jockey of the leading chestnut goes for the whip and yells when Justa is approaching. Jockeys’ ignorance of their equine partners’ voices and mistrust of them reflect their arrogance out of anthropocentrism and speciesism.

In summary, through the interspecies cooperation between Justa and Roberto, Smiley calls our attention to animals’ intelligence, tactics, discretion, composure, initiative, and talents. Animals play an even more crucial role than humans under certain circumstances. It is important for humans to listen to animals, acknowledge their subjectivity, trust their capability, and adjust to their tempo in order to achieve a smooth and successful interspecies cooperation and communication. Moreover, the intercorporeal interactions between Justa and Roberto reveal the multimodality in interspecies communication, which has been ignored for a long time in a

culture of anthropocentrism. In a word, through the trust and attunement between Justa and Roberto, Smiley advocates interspecies interactions between humans and animals in a dialogical paradigm.

Trust and Attunement Between Justa Bob and Eddie in Horse Racing

The second case relates to the interspecies cooperation between Justa Bob and another young jockey named Eddie in horse racing. Being still calm and alert, Justa is an extremely experienced racer with 54 starts. As for horse racing, “he knew everything about it” (Smiley, 2000, p. 464). His horse-trainer is William Vance, who knows Justa well. When putting Eddie up, Vance warns him just to hold on and leave Justa to do the job during the whole racing process, for “He knows more about it than any horse out there” (p. 465). It turns out that Vance is right. The trust and attunement between Justa and Eddie play a key role in their successful interspecies cooperation in horse racing.

Justa’s cooperation with Eddie is different from the one with Roberto. They are faced with a big test at the beginning of the race. At the moment when horses come out of the gate, the neighbor horse bumps Justa toward the rail and dislodges Eddie who slips to the outside. In reaction, Justa swags a step, while the other horses are past him. Justa swerves to the outside, and Eddie rights himself and takes hold. And then Justa takes off. With proper corporeal attunement to each other, they successfully avoid a disaster. Moreover, Justa changes his former strategy of being just off the pace and saving himself for his only move. This time he runs like a different horse, “full bore, head down, body flat. He ran down the horses in front of him...He shot them down one by one and kept going” (Smiley, 2000, p. 465). Eddie has his face buried in his equine partner’s neck the whole time. There is one horse before Justa around the second turn. In the homestretch, Justa “blew past him as if jet-propelled, and crossed the finish line a good three lengths in front” (p. 465). Justa wins again. Different from last time’s narrow-margin-victory, this time is a complete victory.

In front of the early emergency, Justa does not panic. Instead, he is calm and agile enough to avoid a tragedy. Furthermore, he is intelligent and dexterous to adjust himself in time to Eddie’s imbalance by veering in the opposite direction so that Eddie finally gets the chance to rebalance himself. Faced with the unexpected start and forced slow-down, Justa is flexible and tactful to change his usual tactics in the following race and run in a totally different way. By contrast, scared by the accidental start, Eddie is somewhat at a loss the rest of the way, entrusting himself and the race to his equine partner. According to Eddie’s later description, the time when Justa runs at full speed, Eddie just buries his face in Justa’s neck without even looking at where they are going. As an inexperienced jockey, Eddie has no other choice but to trust Justa. It turns out that his trust is totally right. With rich experience, high intelligence, and intercorporeal interaction, Justa is dependable in finding the best way to win. Their timely attunement to each other, especially at that crucial moment when Eddie loses balance, guarantees their final success. Eddie is astounded by Justa’s dexterity and intellect so much that he tells Vance after the match—“Well, I nearly fell off there at first, but he kinda hoisted me back on, somehow, or that’s what it felt like, then he took the bit in his teeth and ran like hell” (Smiley, 2000, p. 466).

To sum up, in the interspecies cooperation with Eddie, Justa obviously exerts substantial influence on their performance and plays a leading role in their final success in the horse race. Smiley discloses a truth to the reader that animals are far more capable and clever than what we think. In many ways, humans have no advantage over nonhumans. Vicki Hearne emphasizes horses’ wisdom and capability by saying that it is not

only as though the rider thinks and the horse executes the thought, but also it is true the other way around—"it is as though the horse thinks and the rider creates, or becomes, a space and direction for the execution of the horse's thoughts" (2007, p. 163). Only when animals are respected and listened to, and only when trust and attunement are involved, can interspecies cooperation go on smoothly and harmoniously. In short, trust and attunement are indispensable in a dialogical interspecies relationship.

Trust and Attunement Between Residual and Pincay in Horse Racing

The third case is the interspecies cooperation between Residual and Pincay in horse racing. Residual is a chestnut filly, who is friendly, easygoing, and calm. Pincay is an experienced and strong jockey. Thanks to their mutual trust and attunement, Residual and Pincay cooperate well with each other in a horse race despite the unexpected accidents.

When the bell clangs and the gates open, Residual in the second slot leaps forward, while some other filly competitors fall into a mess. The filly in number-one slot stands for a moment, and the filly in number-four spot jumps out and then stops dead in her track. The outside filly crosses to the rail, seemingly being out of control, and the number-three filly rears up and dumps her jockey. Residual and the number-six horse are in front, followed by the riderless number-three filly. The two horses close in on Residual, with horse number-six pressing against her and the riderless filly right on her heels. In such a hard situation, Residual floats. Soon around the beginning of the turn, all six horses are strung out along the rail, nose to tail: Filly number-six is first, followed by the riderless filly, Residual is third, followed by filly number-one, the number-four filly is fifth, followed by number five.

As they enter the stretch, some jockeys begin to take action. The leading jockey goes to his whip; the last two pull to the outside. Nevertheless, Pincay does nothing for a moment, and then "he simply moved his hands up the filly's neck and seemed to lift himself off her" (Smiley, 2000, p. 160). Different from the other jockeys who hurriedly give orders to the horses, Pincay shows enough trust to his partner, waits for a moment to let Residual modulate herself, and then adjusts himself to his equine partner through intercorporeal communication, moving his hands up Residual's neck. With the attunement going on smoothly, Residual continues to float.

She floated around the riderless filly, who, as they came under the stands, threw her head in fear at the noise everyone was making. She floated away from the fillies behind her, and she floated right up to the lead filly, seemed to encompass her and then to overtake her. They crossed the finish line. (p. 160)

Although the results come up to show that Residual comes in second, losing the first prize by a hair's breadth, considering the chaos and danger, she does pretty well. The cooperation between Residual and Pincay fully exhibits their mutual trust and attunement, the importance of which is emphasized by Gilbert, contending that "Considering the partner's role in the situation and adapting their roles to meet the needs of the situation is a fundamental element of interactional trust in the horse-human relationship" (2014, p. 484).

In sum, the intercorporeal interaction between Residual and Pincay shows their mutual trust and respect. Moreover, both of them are willing to attune themselves to each other in different situations. Pincay's refusal to use whips forms a sharp contrast to some other jockeys' absolute domination of horses, no matter resorting to whips, or pulling the horses to some direction in their judgement. They neither trust Thoroughbreds' capability and judgement, nor pay any attention to their corporeal signals. By contrast, Pincay respects Residual as his

cooperator, trusts her competence and agility, and listens to her voices so as to attune himself to her in intercorporeal interaction. Through the interspecies cooperation between Residual and Pincay, Smiley attaches great importance to interspecies trust and attunement, which are crucial to a dialogical interspecies relationship.

Trust and Attunement Between Mr. T and Joy in Horse Training

The fourth case is concerned with the interspecies cooperation between Mr. T and Joy in horse training. In *Horse Heaven*, the relationship between Mr. T and Joy is too important to neglect. It is Joy who helps Mr. T out of maltreatment. After Mr. T's arrival, he and Joy establish a profound friendship. When Mr. T becomes Froney's Sis's regular pony who accompanies her in the training, he himself is also expected to do such exercise as galloping to avoid stiffening body, under Jack Perkins' suggestion. Therefore, Joy, for the first time, rides Mr. T on the training track despite their daily interactions. Their first cooperation in training opens another way of interaction between them—kinaesthetic interaction, in which Mr. T and Joy trust and attune themselves to each other so as to cooperate well.

At the beginning when she is hoisted by Jack onto Mr. T's back, Joy feels a bit nervous. Jack advises her to nestle in there over his center of gravity to let Mr. T balance her. Mr. T is fascinated by the new training mode, so he flicks his ears and runs with big strides happily. Then Mr. T moves into a big trot, launching Joy with every pace into a high post. In response, Joy holds the reins tightly. Mr. T, accordingly, tucks his chin and takes stronger hold of his partner, which gives Joy a feeling like "the back of her head was connected to his jaw by a wire that both held her in place and vibrated with information" (Smiley, 2000, p. 128).

In this way, an intercorporeal connection is built up between them, waiting for further advancement. After a round of trot on the training track, Joy gets more suggestions from Jack about how to gallop Mr. T, but Joy does not completely follow his advice this time. She loosens her grip a little and Mr. T moves at a canter. As opposed to Jack's advice on galloping, Joy plans to continue cantering, which seems to "rock beneath her, floating her along like a flea on the horse's neck" (Smiley, 2000, p. 128). Joy feels Mr. T's rhythm underneath her and floats with it without any interruption or domination, leaving much freedom to her partner. With their smooth kinaesthetic interaction, Mr. T breaks into a gallop of his own accord, which is beyond Joy's expectation. In response, Joy bridges the reins excitedly, with tears in her eyes and blank sound in her ears. They are closely interconnected through such a cooperation: "He seemed to fill her with power as he sped up, power that ran from her toes and her hands to the center of her body and gathered there, giving her the strength and the balance to be still..." (p. 128)

With the upgrade of intercorporeal interaction, the two bodies become one. Not only are their bodies integrated, but their sensations are also interconnected, as a result of which the interaction goes on via kinaesthetic, tactile, visual, and aural ways. As regards such kind of human-horse interconnection from which interspecies trust develops, Gilbert argues that "Building a connection between horse and rider is often described as a physical and emotional experience. In establishing a connection the rider seeks to 'become one' with the horse" (2014, p. 483). In their cooperation, Mr. T and Joy trust each other, and attune to each other kinaesthetically, with the power flowing from one body to the other. Their cooperation in horse training turns out to be a great success, which does good to both the horse and the rider in enhancing their power and feeling of each other's power (Patton, 2003, p. 97). Furthermore, Mr. T takes a leading role in this interspecies

cooperation, which fully unfolds his nature, capability, and intelligence. Hence Mr. T's independent subjectivity is revealed. Meanwhile, the fluid intersubjectivity between them emerged from their intercorporeal interaction. The mutual trust and attunement contribute to a smooth kinaesthetic interaction between them so that a successful interspecies cooperation and a dialogical interspecies relationship come into being.

Conclusion

The four cases of interspecies cooperation examined above demonstrate that *Horse Heaven* presents trust and attunement as essential to successful human-horse interaction. Whether in horse racing or training, harmonious cooperation depends not on unilateral human control but on the ability of humans and horses to perceive, respect, and respond to one another. Through the characterization of Thoroughbreds such as Justa Bob, Residual, and Mr. T, Smiley challenges the anthropocentric assumption that humans alone possess intelligence, agency, and judgment. Her horses are represented as active and competent subjects capable of making decisions, adapting to changing circumstances, and significantly influencing the outcomes of interspecies cooperation.

Intercorporeal interaction is central to this process. Communication between horses and humans occurs not only in verbal way but also through bodily movements, rhythms, tactile sensations, gestures, and kinaesthetic responses. By perceiving and adjusting to one another through these corporeal signals, horses and humans develop mutual trust and attunement. Importantly, the human participants often need to relinquish excessive control and listen to their equine partners, thereby acknowledging their knowledge, capabilities, and subjectivity.

By contrasting relationships based on trust and attunement with practices of whipping, domination, and disregard for equine agency, Smiley critiques anthropocentrism and speciesism. She suggests that genuine interspecies cooperation becomes possible only when animals are treated as responsive subjects rather than passive objects under human control. In this sense, *Horse Heaven* moves from a monological and hierarchical model of human-animal relations toward a dialogical one in which both species participate actively in shaping interaction. As Plumwood argues, such relationships should be "dialogical ones that are responsive to the other on their own terms" (2005, p. 111). Ultimately, Smiley's novel advocates an interspecies ethic grounded in listening, respect, trust, and mutual responsiveness, demonstrating that trust and attunement can foster more reciprocal and ethically meaningful relationships between humans and animals.

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