

“HOW’S DE DEVIL? AN’ WHAT’S HIS LATEST TRICK?”: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLK TRADITION IN THE POETRY OF STERLING BROWN

BRANDON BLACK

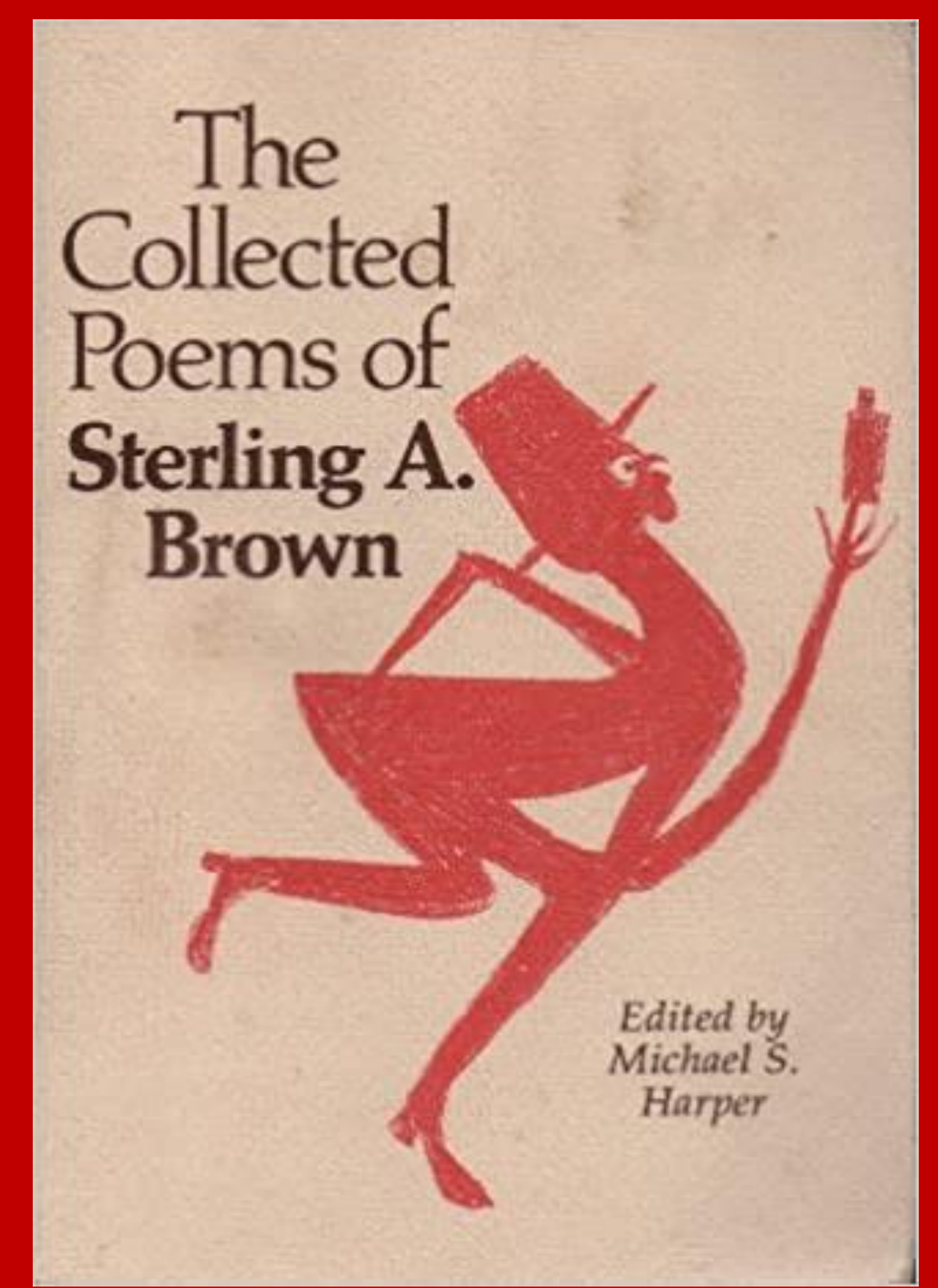
ENGLISH 6221

FACULTY ADVISOR: DR. LAURA DUBEK

BACKGROUND

When Sterling Brown published *Southern Road* in 1932, black poets were moving away from traditional folk poetry. Before the Civil War, blackface minstrelsy was popular in the United States. Blackface minstrelsy portrayed blacks as “contented and servile” and “instilled the stereotypes of blacks as childlike, carefree, and in need of protection” (Moody-Turner 34). After the Civil War, black performers began to perform instead of their white counterparts. Black performers were “trapped within the confines of caricature and rewarded for their ability to personify the stereotypes conjured up by white minstrel performances” (34). Later, the mostly white audience desired to see “authentic” portrayals of black life on the plantation.

Just a few years before Brown’s birth the show “Black America” was set up in the city “complete with Negro cabins, hen yards, chickens, mules” and five hundred African Americans that were billed as “brought directly from the field” (36). These images of “authentic” life for African Americans instilled the stereotype that that there were differences between the races and that the “separation of blacks and whites followed existing customs, traditions, and habits” (41). These stereotypes ended up being codified into law by state legislatures who believed they were upholding the “customs” of the people. The study of African American folklore was taken up by W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Pauline Hawkins, Sterling Brown, and others as a “conscious cultivation of an oppositional perspective and history embodied in black folklore” (44). Sterling Brown chose to use the dialect of black southerners to show the humanity of the people that was denied to them by social circumstances.



SLIM GREER AS “TRICKSTER”:

EXPLORING ANXIETIES, EXPOSING INJUSTICE

- Slim passes as white in Arkansas even though he was “no lighter than a dark midnight”
- He is sent out of Atlanta via railroad because he violated the city’s law against black people laughing outdoors.
- “Skinny” and “down to de gristle,” Slim decides to become a preacher so he can have his “cake” on Earth and his “pie” in the sky (*Collected Poems*, 84)

In the essay collection *Mythical Trickster Figures*, Robert Pelton does an excellent job explaining the origins of the trickster figure. Pelton argues that the trickster reflects the “psychic anxieties and social decisions of a community” (136). The trickster “speaks extravagantly in the specific language of any given people” just as Slim Greer, the “talkinges’ guy an’ biggest liar,” does throughout the five poems that make up the Slim Greer sequence.

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LISTEN TO THE TALE
OF OLE SLIM GREER,
WAITINES’ DEVIL
WAITIN’ HERE;
TALKINGES’ GUY
AN’ BIGGEST LIAR,
WITH ALWAYS A NEW LIE
ON THE FIRE.

STERLING BROWN

- **1901** – Born May 1st in Washington, D.C.
- **1922** – Graduates from Williams College in Massachusetts
- **1923** – Graduates from Harvard with a Master's Degree in English, begins teaching at Virginia Theological Seminary and College
- **1927** – Marries Daisy Turnbull
- **1929** – Begins teaching at Howard University
- **1932** – *Southern Road* is published by Harcourt
- **1936** – Editor of *Negro Affairs* for the Federal Writers' Project
- **1937** – Awarded Guggenheim Fellowship and publishes *Negro Poetry and Drama* and *The Negro in American Fiction*
- **1941** – Edited the influential anthology *The Negro Caravan*.
- **1945** – Made national news when he turned down a full-time position at Vassar College.
- **1969** – Retires from Howard University after 40 years of teaching
- **1975** – *The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems* published
- **1980** – *The Collected Poetry of Sterling Brown* is published and wins the Lenore Marshall Prize
- **1984** – Named Poet Laureate of Washington, D.C.
- **1989** - Dies at the age of 87



SLIM GREER, THE DEVIL, AND THE BLUES TRADITION

When studying Brown and his use of the devil in “Slim in Hell,” it is helpful to understand the devil in the blues tradition. An avid fan of the blues, Brown said that the blues where “second in importance only to the spirituals” in the folk tradition (*A Son’s Return* 222). The devil in blues music has a long history. Adam Gussow in *Beyond the Crossroads: The Devil and the Blues Tradition* traces the history of the blues as “devil music.” Gussow research shows the stigma of the blues as the devil’s music back to the aftermath of the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening. By the late 19th century many independent religious dominations began to rapidly grow in the southern United States. According to Gussow, “the devil of the black southern church” was whoever interfered with the growth of the church (32). This “devil” took the form of anyone playing rhythmic music which would naturally attract dancing and sometimes alcohol.

The devil evolved from the inspirer of devil music to the form of the slave master in the black imagination (Gussow 108). After Emancipation, the devil became the white boss man, sheriff, and prison farm warden in the carceral network of the south (108). Gussow argues that bluesman and his use of the devil “coexists with a desire to evade, destabilize and usurp the devilish prerogatives a white mastery” (109). This the devil that Sterling Brown created in “Slim in Hell.” As Slim travels through hell it looks mostly harmless, but as Slim descends in he starts seeing religious hypocrisy and drunkenness. It is only when Slim sees that the white devils are throwing the black devils in the furnace that Slim flees because it looks too much like Dixie. Brown’s representation of the devil as a cracker “wid a sheriff’s star” aligns with the traditional use of the devil as the oppressor in traditional blues music (91).