

## HARRIS'S SHORT ANIMAL STORIES. A SOCIO-LINGUISTIC POINT OF VIEW

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### Abstract

A *fable* is a short and at first glance funny animal story which is used to teach something. Joel Chandler Harris, a southern journalist, presented in 1880 animal stories or legends told by a former slave, Uncle Remus, who supposedly had “nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery and the period he described”. In the fictional framework of the stories, a plantation owner’s little son listened and questioned the old man about the animals, just as Harris, as a Middle Georgia youth, had also listened to the slaves telling stories. All the tales have *linguistic*, *literary* and *historical* importance from the moral and social points of view. Harris with *The Uncle Remus Tales* brings us back to the time of Aesop and La Fontaine. Like these authors, Harris, through the power of words, used the metaphorical world of the fable to instruct and seduce the reader.

**Keywords:** *fable, linguistic analysis, sociolinguistics*

### 1. The Didactic intention of Fables

“Almost the first manifestation of the child’s convalescence was the renewal of his interest in the wonderful adventures of Brother Rabbit, Brother Fox, and the other brethren who flourished in that strange past over which this modern Aesop had thrown the veil of fable.” How Brother Fox failed to get his grapes. (*Nights with Uncle Remus*)

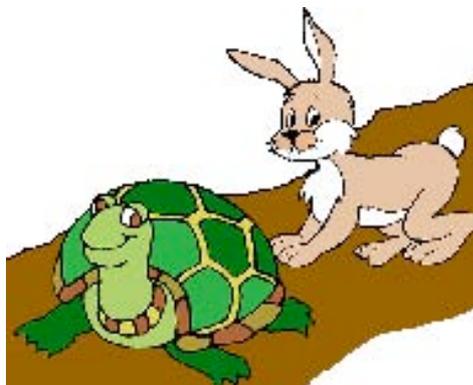


Figure 1: Fables are simple, short and with a moral purpose and they can attract young children who usually love animal stories.

Throughout history, there have been many fable theorists who have reflected on the definition of fable and its different functions. Thomas Noel analyses some questions and the usage of this fantastic literary genre in the first two chapters of *The Theories of the Fable in the Eighteenth Century* (1975). Following him, in Great Britain, for example, John Locke recommended fables to teach language at a time when social concern was growing, particularly in education.

In the same way, the fabulist La Fontaine also alluded to the instructive aspect or value of fables. Fénelon stated that the fabulist, after telling a fable, should wait and allow the child’s curiosity to grow to the point where he begs to hear another. Antoine Furetière, one of La Fontaine’s friends and followers, claimed that animals reprove and correct much more effectively than the teachings of members of our own species. La Motte pointed to the fact that a fable is an instruction disguised under the allegory of an action. Finally, Breitinger, a

German fable critic, established that there is a close relationship between animals and human beings.

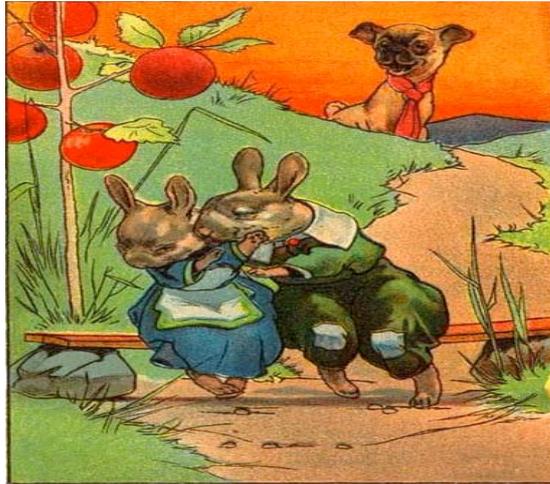


Figure 2: As we can see in this picture animals can act in the same way as humans.

Furthermore, according to certain theories, fables have a conscious double meaning. On the one hand, they are used as a means of entertainment but also as a means of denouncement; they are a concealed criticism against an adverse reality. The message the fable transmits is such an appalling truth that the author hides it behind short allegorical animal stories. It is a hard world in a constant fight to survive. The natural thing is for the weakest animal to be destroyed by the strongest.

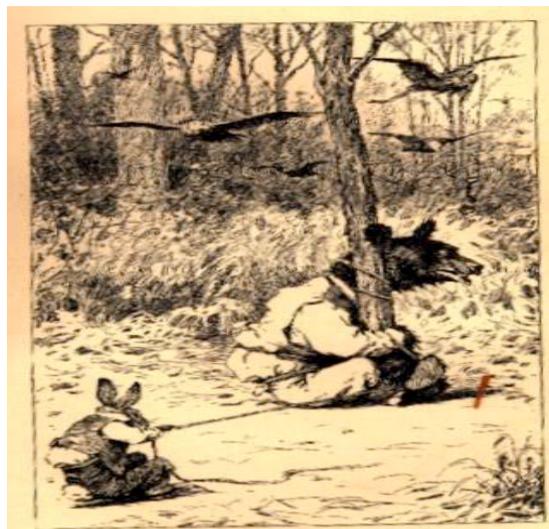


Figure 3: But with intelligence and cunning it could be the other way round, that is, the weakest animal can beat the strongest and escape from him.

For centuries people have been telling folktales, sometimes the same ones with characters changing their names but not their personalities from culture to culture. Reynard the Fox, trickster of the medieval French tales, becomes Anansi Spider in the Caribbean culture and Rabbit in the Gullah<sup>1</sup> tales or the jackal in India and the wolf in Western America. What explains the fascination of these stories for so many hundreds of years? Maybe we turn to them for laughter and wisdom, the people's wisdom. As these tales reflect human needs, it

<sup>1</sup> "Gullah" is very probably a deviation from the country name Angola, shortened to Gola. Many negroes from Lower Guinea were brought to this country in the days of the slave trade. (John G. Williams, 1895:xi).

is not surprising that food, and more specifically, the search for food, is the main topic in all these traditional stories. The conflicts that are generated by the lack and acquisition of it are many.

Aesop, the mythical narrator of fables, was a dumb slave—we cannot forget how the concepts of fable and slavery are related—. As the legend has it, the Goddess Isis and the Muses gave him the “gift of gab” and the virtue of telling stories. He used to tell stories in order to entertain and teach his consecutive masters’ children but they also served other purposes, mainly political, and that is the reason why all the vices of human beings are reflected in them.

Likewise, other fabulists used their tales not only for entertainment but also for hidden objectives. Therefore, social and political writers used fables to express their grievances. In England, it is worth mentioning John Gay who, in his stories, attacked the corrupt politicians of his time. In Spain the fable was an instrument for introducing neoclassical ideas, as Don Tomás de Iriarte did. Although it is not exactly a fable, *Animal farm* (1945) by George Orwell may be compared with that literary genre. The sentence “all the animals are equal but some more than others” has become one of the most satirical ones in the world. The animals in the story try to change the established order; they are below the level of human beings and organize a revolution to get rid of them. *Animal Farm* is more than a satire. It describes the constant fight to survive. On the other hand current Science Fiction is yesterday’s fable. The destruction of the planet by human behaviour is a message. Finally, we can say the same thing about the cartoons on television nowadays. The adventures of Tom and Jerry, for example, are a real fable about the fight for survival. After this brief introduction to the history of the fable we are ready to point out the author of *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* and his connection with this kind of short animal story.

## **2. Joel Chandler Harris and his intention behind *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus***

Joel Chandler Harris rose to fame with the figure of Uncle Remus and his Brer Rabbit stories. The negro character of Uncle Remus originated in Harris’s mind as a consequence of his stay in a plantation as a child; it was there that he got to know about the black dialect and folklore that he would reproduce in his work. Florence Baer in *Sources and Analogues of the Uncle Remus Tales* claims the following: “His [Harris’s] is the first serious attempt to record the folktales, songs and sayings of the Southern Negroes in the exact language and style in which they existed” (1980:24). Her study points out the accuracy of Harris’ tales in both content and oral styles as recognized by modern collectors of African materials.

Harris used the language and dialect of the negro slave in the “Old South” in his writings of Uncle Remus. How did this make his stories believable and yet entertaining? And what is more, knowing the fact that Harris was a journalist, were the stories written for entertainment alone, or were they lessons in humanity?

Just as the popularity of Jean de la Fontaine’s fables, which aimed at criticizing the king’s political regime, was not accidental, it was not a mere coincidence either that Harris wrote his Uncle Remus stories at the time of the Reconstruction Period, when there was somehow a certain nostalgic sentiment for ancient times. The Southerner of that period had suffered the destruction of the Plantation System and all the consequences which derived from it. An overt attack by Harris against the Old South and the Slavery system could have damaged the “Southern Pride” and people’s feelings. Because of this, Harris made use of allegorical tales for his social and political protest. Therefore, it is clear that in many

instances, the questions mentioned above generate a lively debate over the nature of slavery and harshness of life on an antebellum plantation. That slaves sang in the course of their daily labour is not to be denied, but it is useful to point out the lyrics of these songs, particularly the more religious ones, with their strong emphasis on the book of Exodus and eventual emancipation.

In Harris's book, Uncle Remus is a former slave who does odd jobs around the plantation after his emancipation. Night after night he tells his animal stories to a little boy, the son of the plantation owners. Apparently, Uncle Remus was a loyal and submissive slave but in fact he is ironic and sarcastic when he tells the stories to the little boy who is in this way influenced by the Negro. Harris, like all fabulists, denounced through the animal tales and through the relationship between Uncle Remus and the little boy the social system in the old South, especially slavery. Joel Chandler Harris, as his different biographers state, was a shy man but at the time of writing his animal fables he was given a special gift, the same that was given to Aesop: "the gift of gab." In fact, language is the instrument that Uncle Remus uses to attract the boy to fulfil his purpose.

Uncle Remus is always trying to attract the child. That is why he sometimes leaves the end of a story for the following night, arousing the boy's curiosity and the desire to meet the old Negro again. The admiration, respect and devotion that Uncle Remus feels for Brer Rabbit, the hero of his tales, who represents the slaves, is obvious and the old negro makes the little boy feel the same. He makes the stories desirable for the boy to such an extent that the worst punishment for him is to be deprived of them. He piques the boy's curiosity, withholds additional information and the conclusions of the stories, and reproduces the sounds and actions of the animal characters like a skilled story-teller.

Within the framework of the stories, Uncle Remus is for the little boy a teacher, a companion, a father substitute and a story-teller at the same time. But, like Brer Rabbit, he can be a manipulator. The title of the first story, "Uncle Remus Initiates the little boy", is relevant in itself because it reveals the dynamics of power that operate throughout the book. The first scene starts placing Miss Sally, the boy's mother, as the outsider, looking through Uncle Remus's cabin's window; she finds her missing son there, "gazing with an expression of the most intense interest". This particular tale in which Brer Rabbit outsmarts Brer Fox is representative of the world the old Negro lives in and the boy is about to enter. When we are first introduced to Uncle Remus, we do not see him as a first person narrator, but rather through the eyes of Miss Sally, whom we see through the eyes of an anonymous limited narrator. The tale also establishes the pattern in which the stories are told.

*The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* reflect all the topics of the society of the "Old South" accurately, but in a special way: in the allegorical animal plantation the role of the aristocratic man is played, ironically, by Brer Rabbit, the weakest animal and the one previously exploited by his owners. The structure of the "Old South" is thus somehow altered, as the rabbit turns over the social order. Under the code of courtesy, hospitality and honour, all the animals pretend to live peacefully, but in fact rivalries for power and prestige may spring at any moment. We should bear in mind that with slavery any black man could be a wolf for the others, as the slave system denied any community feeling and destroyed solidarity in the fight for survival:



Figure 4 “Dat was endurin’er de dog days. Der er mighty wom times, dem ar dog days is” (Nights, “Old Granny Wolf”:347)<sup>2</sup>

We may interpret the “dog days” as an era when the crudities of existence for black people are most apt to justify the tricks:

*“In dem days, de creeturs bleedzd ter look out fer deyse’f, mo’speshually dem wát ain’t got hawn en huff. Brer Rabbit ain’t got hawn en huff, en he bleedzd ter be his own lawyer.”* (Nights, “How Brother Rabbit Got the Meat:209)

In these stories animals steal food from one another, lie, cheat, trick etc.; however, they observe the social rules: they speak to each other as neighbours whenever they meet, they take meals together, they start communal projects and go together to court “Miss Meadows and de gals” (who supposedly represent prostitutes). Power, food, and sex are the main topics of the book. The major characters are Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Brer Bear, Brer Wolf and Old Man Tarrypin. But there are also other animals such as the frog or the sparrow. However, there is a hierarchy in this animal plantation. The strongest animals, i.e., the fox, the wolf, the bear, the cow and the lion represent the aristocratic and white High Southern Society. But in fact they do not enjoy this status since the weakest animals (the rabbit, the turtle, the frog, the owl, the polecat, the sparrow and the goose) manage to trick them and the system by using their intelligence. Therefore, physical force is not the way to get to the top of this society:



Figure 5: “TAIN’T THE BIGGEST en de strongest dat does de mostest in dis world.” “De elephen may be strong; I speck he is; en de tiger may be servigorous ez dey say he is; but Brer Rabbit done outdone bofe un um” (Friends:52)

<sup>2</sup> Richard Chase’s edition 1983(1955) is the one we are using in this study. The whole book contains the seven volumes of the Uncle Remus Tales.

Thus, Brer Rabbit is the hero in Uncle Remus Stories and, as Robert Hemenway claims in the introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1986:25), there is an allegorical identification between Brer Rabbit and black people. He must always keep a lookout for everything; he cannot trust anyone because danger is always around him. He must think quickly and clearly. He was born in a “brier patch” and like this brier patch Brer Rabbit is hard: “*He look up de road; he ain’t see nobody. He look befo’, he look behime, he look all ’roun’; he ain’t see nobody. He lissen, en lissen; he ain’t year nothin’.*” (Nights, “*Brother Wolf Says Grace*”:227)

In the famous tale “The Wonderful Tar Baby Story”, the fox sets a trap for Brer Rabbit. He makes a tar figure and places it in the middle of a path. Raised in Southern manners, when Brer Rabbit sees this figure he greets it, but he is not greeted back, which makes him furious. He threatens to hit it and what happens is that he is stuck to that substance.



Figures 6 and 7: These are two images of the tale. In the first one Brer Rabbit is getting furious because of not being greeted back. In the second one Brer Fox is laughing at the sight of Brer Rabbit stuck in tar.

The continuation of this tale is “How Mr Rabbit Was too Sharp for Mr Fox”. Brer Rabbit, caught by Brer Fox, uses what is called “escape by false plea”. The trick consists in accepting all kinds of punishment except one. Brer Rabbit pretends he is afraid of being thrown to the brier patch. He asks Brer fox to be punished in any way except the brier patch. Of course the wicked mind of Brer Fox decides to impose the worst punishment so Brer Rabbit is thrown to the brier patch. Brer Rabbit has got what he wanted because, although full of adversities, the brier patch is the place where he was born and where he had learnt to survive:



Figure 8: “ ‘Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox--bred en bawn in a brier-patch!’ en wid dat he skip out des ez lively as a cricket in de embers.”(1986:64)



Figure 9: Brer Rabbit has become the Master; the social hierarchy has been turned over and so he smokes peacefully.

### 3. The dialect in *The Uncle Remus Tales*

*Well, 'tain't ez you may one er deze yer reg'lar up en down tales, what run crossways. Dish yer tale goes straight. (Uncle Remus and his friends)*

In an essay entitled “The Dummy in the Window: Joel Chandler Harris and the Invention of Uncle Remus”, Alice Walker<sup>3</sup> (1989:26,29,32) tells of listening to her parents tell the same stories that Joel Chandler Harris recorded earlier in Eatonton, Georgia, the common birthplace of both writers. This is not the case but perhaps it does not really matter at all if you are from another culture yourself so long as you immerse yourself so thoroughly in the culture of the stories that the tale rings true. The truth is that these stories were told in a Black English dialect by an imaginary elderly black male to an imaginary seven-year-old white boy.

Joel Chandler Harris stands among the greatest writers of dialect in the world. And, as Stella Brewer Brookes (1967:111) stated “*so accurately and faithfully has he produced the dialect that persons in Georgia who have heard the speech of some of the ante-bellum Negroes can almost hear them speaking, through Uncle Remus*”. In fact, many people thought Harris was black. Since the mastery of the dialect is one of Harris’s notable appeals, his statements with regard to the dialect are revealing. In the introduction to the first volume he said:

*“.....my purpose has been to preserve the legends themselves in their original simplicity, and to wed them permanently to the quaint dialect-if indeed, it can be called a dialect-through the medium of which they have become a part of the domestic history of every Southern family; and I have endeavoured to give to the whole a genuine flavour of the old plantation.” (1986:39)*

<sup>3</sup> Her talk was originally given in 1981 at the Atlanta Historical Society.

“.....But the discriminating reader does not need to be told that it would be impossible to separate these stories from the idiom in which they have been recited for generations. The dialect is a part of the legends themselves, and to present them in any other way would be to rob them of everything that gives them vitality.”

To what extent are these statements true? Sumner Ives (1950) studied the phonetic representation of the Negro dialect in the 19th century as Harris represented it and claimed his accuracy. Nevertheless, Lee Pederson studied the fact (1985:292-298) that Uncle Remus's language does not represent the plantation negro at all since it is a literary creation whose roots date back to Cicero and Seneca. In order to demonstrate his theory, Pederson made an exhaustive study of the first sentence pronounced by Uncle Remus in the first story. After having analysed it from a syntactic and phonetic point of view he affirmed a conscious writing style by Harris. For example, he says that Harris made use of elision, simplification, assimilation, and vocalization in favour of the language fluency. It might be true that Harris had a literary intention but we cannot deny that he is one of the best dialect writers in the world. Furthermore, Harris not only reproduced the black dialect but also southern dialectal differences depending on social status, fact that was also studied by Ives Sumner in "Dialect Differentiation in the Stories of Joel Chandler Harris" (1955:88-96)

The Uncle Remus dialect is characterized by the adaptation of existing English words as well as the addition of words for the pictorial effect, the euphony, and the delight which the negroes have for "big words". Although the language spoken by Uncle Remus represents that of Middle Georgia, Alphonso Smith (1918:358) points out that some of the words are also found in the dialect of Virginia; it is remarkable here that Uncle Remus himself admits that he comes from Virginia: "I come from ferginny" as we can see in the introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and his Sayings* by Hemenway (1986:179). This brief article is not an exhaustive study of the language but we can mention some characteristics common to both dialects such as the following:

1. The plural of all nouns tends to become regular: fouts (feet), gooses (geese), toofes (teeth).
2. There is the tendency to add the "s" to all forms of the verb, like in "I makes".
3. Uncle Remus uses "d" for "th". For example words like the, that, them, become "de", "dat" and "dem".
4. He uses the final "f" for the voiceless "th" in words like mouth and tooth which become in Uncle Remus speech "mouf" and "toof".
5. There is an omission of the "h" in words like why and what, which become "wat" and "wy".
6. Uncle Remus likes long words like "*sustonished*" (*astonished*) o "*rekermember*" (*remember*).
7. The proverbs and idioms are also remarkable here: " 'oman (woman) tongue ain't got no Sunday", "*des ez lively ez a cricket in de ashes*"

Uncle Remus is the storyteller of most of the tales, but Daddy Jack, who comes from the coast, tells some stories too. The dialect Daddy Jack makes use of is a little different. As examples we can mention some words like *shake*, *ain't*, *break* and *same*, which in Daddy Jack become "*shekky*", "*yent*", "*bre'k*" y "*sem*". Besides, he uses "t" for the unvoiced "th" in all positions like "*troo*" for *through*, "*nuttin*" for *nothing*, or "*mout*" for *mouth*.

Nowadays, there are children's versions about this great work by Harris in Standard English. It may appear easier, no doubt, but the dialect that Harris used in his stories was a distinctive mark of the time he described. The written transcription of the Negro speech does

not mean at all a racist matter as some authors have suggested. This is the case of Michele Birnbaum (1991:36) who thinks that a variation of the Standard English means racial discrimination. What Birnbaum forgets is that, apart from the aristocrats and the middle class in the old south, the dialect was used in the plantations and in the mountains without any racial distinction. The dialect used by Harris reappeared in the 20's and 30's. But many literate blacks neglected them in search of a higher culture. The only exception to this group, Keenan (1992:86) says, was Hurston who enjoyed the Afro-American folklore in dialect. Robert Hemenway also referred to the racial connotation of Remus's language. In this way, in the introduction to the first Harris's book, he pointed out:

*"The standard English used by the author to frame the tales contrasts with the vivid dialect in the stories themselves, suggesting that black language is colourful but ignorant, that black people are picturesque but intellectually limited."*(1986:21-22)

As a conclusion we can summarize that *The Tales of Uncle Remus* can be studied from different points of view: linguistic, (specifically dialectal); comparative literature (how the tales compare with and differ from other famous animal stories); psychological (negro's psychology); historical-sociological (a revealing portrait of a characteristic American social institution-the Southern Plantation- "*befo' de war, endurin' er de war, en atterwards*"-, and folkloristic. Joel Chandler Harris wanted to perpetuate the oral tradition in written form to preserve some historical data of the old plantation culture. We can state that *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* is funny if we think of the characters as mere animals. The situations created by Brer Rabbit make the stories funnier and this comic aspect hides the ironical reality. The irony is in the service of a moral with which every fable is supposed to conclude. The hidden words are the invisible power of the storyteller; the language is what makes the reader interested in what is said. The voice is more than a presence; it is outside the story but at the same time inside it, at the centre of it. The fabulist should make use of the word to seduce the listener or reader. The power of the fabulist is the power of dissimulations, allegory and irony. This power is as strong in Uncle Remus as in La Fontaine, and the fabulist himself (Uncle Remus) has become part of the fable.

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