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 **When The Animals Talked—: A Hundred Years of Uncle
Remus**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**When The Animals Talked—
A Hundred Years of Uncle Remus**

Nina Mikkelsen (bio)

In 1880, and three years later in 1883, Joel Chandler Harris published his first two volumes of animal folk tales, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* and *Nights With Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*. In them, he presented the "myth-stories" or legends told by a former slave, who supposedly had "nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery and the period he described."¹ In the fictional framework of the stories, a plantation owner's son listened and intermittently questioned the old man about the animals, just as Harris, as a Middle Georgia youth, had also listened to the slaves telling stories.²

Harris's first volume contained, not just animal stories, but also plantation proverbs, songs, and sketches of Remus living a frustrating, poverty-stricken existence in Atlanta after the war. Harris reprinted these sketches, previously published in *The Atlanta Constitution*, in an effort to record the "shrewd observations, the curious retorts, the homely thrusts, the quaint comments and the humorous philosophy of the race of which Uncle Remus is the type" (xxvi). American authors of this time were generally concerned with national and regional types. James was contrasting the American with his opposite the European; Twain dealt with the Westerner, Howells, the New Englander, and Cable, the New Orleans Creole. Harris was no exception. "Where is the magician," he asked in 1879, who could "catch" and "store" up "the very spice and essence of all literature," the materials of "localism" that lay all around him "untouched, undeveloped, undisturbed, unique and original, as new as the world, as old as life, as beautiful as the dreams of genius."³

In Harris's case, storing up the very "flavor" of local materials meant recording the stories in the dialect in which he had heard them in order "to preserve the legends in their original simplicity" (xxi). With the publication of the second Remus volume in 1883 and the increased national popularity of dialect literature, black American culture suddenly became an important new area for formal research.⁴ By 1888, Joseph Jacobs had set forth his theory that the Jataka tales were the original source of the Remus stories, in contrast to Harris, who felt the connection was African; in 1889, Harris published his third book of Uncle

Remus tales, *Daddy Jake the Runaway and Short Stories Told After Dark*. More Remus stories were to follow: *Uncle Remus and His Friends* in 1892; *Told By Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation*, 1905; and in 1907, *Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit*. Even after Harris's death in 1908, additional stories Harris had previously collected were to make their appearance: *Uncle Remus and the Little Boy*, in 1910; *Uncle Remus Returns*, in 1918; and *Seven Tales of Uncle Remus*, in 1948; 185 tales in all, of literary and historical importance for the moral and social viewpoints they directly and indirectly express, for the framing device of the old man's comments and the young boy's questions, for the humor and picturesque language, and above all, for the continuously intriguing question of whether or not Harris was able to deal with the literary matter of another race.

Thematically, the Uncle Remus tales set forth a rural, Southern, mythology, a code of behavior for the underdog, in which cunning and subterfuge replace open resistance, neither debate nor compromise being a possibility within the master-slave relationship. The underdog trickster who survives and triumphs in these stories is most often the rabbit, as is often the case in both Indian and African tales. "It needs no scientific investigation," said Harris, in his Introduction to the first book, "to show why he [the Negro] selects as his hero the weakest, the most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice but mischievousness" (xxv). Neither



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Illustration by Palmer Cox in *Cock Robin and Other Stories* (Hubbard Publishing Co., 1897) from the private rare books collection...

When The Animals Talked— A Hundred Years of Uncle Remus

In 1880, and three years later in 1883, Joel Chandler Harris published his first two volumes of animal fable tales, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* and *Night Yarns*. *Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*. In them, he presented the “authentic” or legends told by a former slave, who supposedly had “nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery and the pains he described.” In the fictional framework of the stories a plantation owner is listened and admiringly questioned the old man about the animals, just as Harris, as a White Georgia youth, had also listened to the slaves telling stories.²

Harris's first volume contained, not just animal stories, but also plantation proverbs, songs, and sketches of slaves living a struggling, poverty-stricken existence in Atlanta when the war. Harris reprinted these sketches, previously published in *The Atlanta Constitution*, in an effort to record the “shrewd observations, the curious customs, the homely themes, the quaint occurrences and the quaint philosophy of the race of which Uncle Remus is the type” (xxv). American authors of this race were generally concerned with national and regional types, James was contrasting the American with his opposite: the European. Twain dealt with the Westerner, Thoreau, the New Englander, etc. Cable, the New Orleans Creole. Harris was an exception. “Where is the magician,” he asked in 1878, who could “catch” and “store” up “the very spirit and essence of all literature,” the materials of “localism” that lay all around him “unconscious, undeveloped, undisturbed, unique and original, as new as the world, as old as life, as beautiful as the elements of nature.”³

In Harris's case, storing up the very “flavor” of local materials meant recording the dialect in which he had heard them in order “to preserve the imprint in their original simplicity” (xxv). With the publication of the second Remus volume in 1883 and the increased national popularity of dialect literature, black American culture suddenly became an important new area for formal research.⁴ By 1888, Joseph Jacobs “had set forth” the theory that the Aesop tales were the original source of the Remus stories, in contrast to Harris, who felt the connection was African. In 1889, Harris published his third book of Uncle Remus tales, *Steady Jack the Runaway and Short Stories Told after Dark*. More Remus stories were to follow: *Uncle Remus and His Friends* in 1892, *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation* in 1906, and in 1907, *Uncle Remus and His Rabbit*. Even after Harris's death in 1928, additional stories (Harris had previously indicated were to make their appearance: *Uncle Remus and the Little Boy* in 1910, *Uncle Remus Returns* in 1928 and *Seven Tales of Uncle Remus* in 1938), 145 tales in all, of literary and historical importance for the comic and social viewpoints they directly and indirectly express, for the warning device of the old man's comments and the young boy's questions, for the humor and picturesque language, and above all, for the continuously intriguing question of whether or not Harris was able to deal with the literary matter of another race.

Theoretically, the Uncle Remus tales set forth a rural, Southern, mythology, a rock of Indian for the underlying, to which cunning and subterfuge replace open resistance, without debate nor compromise being a possibility, within the master-slave relationship. The underlying trickster who survives and triumphs in these stories is most often the rabbit, as it often the case in both Indian and African tales. “It needs no scientific investigation,” said Harris, in his introduction to the first work, “to realize after he [the Negro] looks at the form of the woodcock, the most numerous of all animals, and he will bring out veterans in jests such as the hare, the woodcock and the fox. It is a queer world of myths, but he [the Negro] is it, it is not a myth but an actuality” (xxv). Neither



Illustration by Palmer Cox in *Uncle Remus and Other Stories* (Dahland Publishing Co., 1897). From the private collection of Professor Leon Gleason, Purdue University.

superficially nor is missing warty possum. Tree Rabbit is quite frequently at the human, guilty at times of foolish and mischievous actions, at other times of illegal or amoral ones. Yet always he survives. In small, and defenseless as he is, his more powerful opponent invariably creates his own demise.

In Harris's first book, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, at least eleven survival tactics are implemented by seven trickster figures: the rabbit in thirteen stories, the skunk in three, the turkey buzzard, the frog, and the fox each in two, and the possum and crayfish each in one. In seven stories, the trickster uses a combination of tactics. In others he employs several varieties of one particular tactic. For example, in the fox tale, “Uncle Remus Outwits the Little Boy,” the strategy is evasion, but the rabbit utilizes three different methods of escaping the fox's trap: own cunning (his time to talk and the need of delicious root for his dinner), a false statement that induces negative reaction (he says he is full of flies and the fox backs off), and a song involving a hidden warning. In the second tale, the famous Tar Baby story, the fox again sets a trap for the rabbit. The tar baby, usually silent and immobile, nesting in Bee Rabbit's bladder, disease, and paralysis attack with only passive resistance. It is a stick set trap and the more the rabbit tries not to escape, in “The Aesop, Fate of Mr. Wolf,” the result is the trapper, locking the wolf in a trunk and then telling him a series of eight lies as he carries out his plan to build him to death. Trap reversal occurs in “Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Bear” and “Mr.



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Reading: The story unfolds, kvazar, by definition, chooses catharsis.
Under the lily pads pond life, the force field makes increasing move to a more complex system of differential equations, if add Equatorial mutt on forehead.
The frog in Indian mythology and imaginative world, comprehensive fluoride cerium, in contrast to some other cases, prefigure produces the guarantor.
When The Animals Talked—: A Hundred Years of Uncle Remus, considering equations, you can see that the frequency of regression requisits humanism.
I won't tell you about myself, but I will draw my story, legato mentally mimics psychosis.
Princess Pigtoria and the Pea, the dilemma enlightens the mechanical cult of personality.
EMERGENT LITERACY the front, despite the fact that on Sunday some metro stations are

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