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Thesis Abstract  
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Joel Chandler Harris: Storyteller, Racist or Humanitarian

Critics throughout have labeled Joel Chandler Harris as many things: folklorist, storyteller, plagiarist, thief, liberal, racist and humanitarian. Just as the words used to describe Harris contradict one another, so does the literary criticism of Harris’ work over the last century. When Harris published his first tale about Uncle Remus, controversy arose as to whether or not the folklore tale was truly African American in origin; or did the tale originate with another culture and later modified by the slaves that Harris heard tell the story? As time went on, although the debate continued on the origin of the Uncle Remus tales, the main focus shifted to Harris’ portrayal of African Americans within the stories. Many people saw Harris’ depiction of Uncle Remus as the stereotypical “happy darky” and refused to look any further into Harris’ work in order to discover a possible deeper meaning to the Uncle Remus stories.

Harris received many conflicting outside influences as a child that shaped the man he became and the beliefs he held. Harris was born to an unwed mother in Eatonton, Georgia in the late 1840s. His physical appearance strikingly resembled that of the Irish immigrant father that left town before he was born. The children that he grew up with in Eatonton picked on Harris and discriminated against him because of his illegitimacy. Around the age of twelve, Harris took an apprenticeship as a printer’s devil on Turnworld Plantation just outside of Eatonton. There Harris learned the workings of newspaper publishing, plantation life and slavery. Joseph Turner was considered a compassionate slave owner; yet, at the same time, he strongly believed in white supremacy and the slavery system. After a day’s work, Harris joined the plantation’s slaves in hunting, games and storytelling sessions. Moving between the two worlds of master and slave allowed Harris to become sympathetic to both sides. Harris was torn as he longed for the idyllic plantation life but at the same time saw the humanity in the slaves on Turnworld Plantation and realized that they were more than just property.

Joel Chandler Harris also lived in a turbulent time for race relations. He published the Uncle Remus stories during the Reconstruction era. The volatile, white audience that Harris wrote for would not have readily accepted his folklore tales if they were presented as a form of advancement of the African American race. Through the Uncle Remus folklore tales, Harris presented a positive picture of African Americans through Brer Rabbit’s cunning and defeat of Brer Fox, Brer Wolf and Brer Bear (who were white). Even Uncle Remus, the “happy darky”, showed the compassion of the African Americans through his interaction with the eager little white boy listening to his tales and learning lessons of life from the ex-slave. In his own way, Harris worked to subvert the system that so many Southerners clung to as their way of life and establish equality between the races.