NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS IGNITES DISCUSSION WITH HIS USE OF DIALECT THROUGHOUT THE UNCLE REMUS TALES

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Joel Chandler Harris Ignites Discussion with His Use of Dialect throughout the Uncle Remus Tales

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When I began this project, my goal was to find out what the critics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries thought of Joel Chandler Harris and his use of dialect in the Uncle Remus Tales. My paper begins with some background information on Harris to show where he came from and how he ended up as one of the most popular authors in our country's history. I then shared the information I discovered on the differences between the reactions of Northerners and Southerners. There were both positive and negative reactions from both parts of the country. I then included Disney's depiction on Uncle Remus, and the changes they made to the content. I concluded with my insights over the project and a wrapping up of key points. Overall, I enjoyed this assignment and am happy I had the opportunity to learn more about Harris and his talents.
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Joel Chandler Harris Ignites Discussion with His Use of Dialect throughout the *Uncle Remus Tales*

"I am advised by my publishers that this book is to be included in their catalogue of humorous publications, and this friendly warning gives me an opportunity to say that however humorous it may be in effect, its intention is perfectly serious; and, even if it were otherwise, it seems to me that a volume written wholly in dialect must have its solemn, not to say melancholy, features. With respect to the Folk-lore series, 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 endeavored to give to the whole a genuine flavor of the old plantation."

--Joel Chandler Harris, from the Introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*

"A shy man himself, he must have listened keenly and sympathetically, for he caught the various patterns of folk speech in great detail. And whatever his narrative ability, he handled the dialogue of his folk characters with skilful discrimination.

--Sumner Ives from *Dialect Differentiation in the Stories of Joel Chandler Harris*

**Introduction**

Joel Chandler Harris has proven to be one of the most unique and gifted authors in American history. Also known to many as one of the most prominent contributing post-war authors, Harris surprises his audience with his ability to capture the vivid life of Southern plantations. In his first and most renowned collection, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880), Harris showcases his knowledge of plantation life. His utilization of the Southern African American dialect represents his most prevalent achievement. Harris, one of the first authors to use this dialect,
certainly did more research on it than any other. Published in 1880, not long after the end of the Civil War and the beginning of Reconstruction, *Uncle Remus* sparked conversation across the country. Over the years, critics and storytellers such as Jennifer Ritterhouse, Mark Twain, and Louis J. Rubin Jr. have assessed this dialect and either praised it or rejected it. Others, such as Walt Disney, have altered it, and even outlawed it. The dialect triggered discussion not only in itself, but in the stereotypes introduced. It has also changed the idea of relationships between white slave-owners and their slaves (Ritterhouse). Since the publication of his first collection, Harris retains his reputation as one of the earliest real folklorists of America, despite what critics have said.

**A Dialect Discovery**

In the small town of Eatonton, Putnam County, Georgia on the 9th of December, 1848, Joel Chandler Harris took his first breath. His mother worked as a poor seamstress. His father deserted them both. Without a male role model, Harris became a very timid child and occasionally stuttered. In the presence of unknown people, Harris kept to himself, but in the presence of those he knew; he had quite the sense of humor and loved practical jokes (Brookes, 5-21). These traits followed Harris throughout his life and significantly impacted the type of author he became.

Until the age of twelve, Harris went to a day school in Eatonton. One day, Harris ventured to the local post office to read the newspapers. He discovered that Mr. Turner, from the “Turnwold Plantation,” sought to employ a teenage boy for his small newspaper *The Countryman*. Harris had always had
enthusiasm for the printer's trade, so he inquired about the position. Lucky for him, he knew Mr. Turner. Mr. Turner likewise knew of Harris's passion and talent, and decided to employ him immediately (Brookes 5). Later, Harris commented on his choice to move to the plantation. Although he loved Eatonton, he knew it did not offer him substantial opportunities. He says,

> It was a great blessing for a young fellow in the clutches of poverty to be raised up among such people as those who lived in Eatonton when I was a boy...but Eatonton was not a newspaper office, and I had to leave there in order to stick my head in an ink fountain. There came a time when I had to be up and doing...

(Brookes 5)

Therefore, Harris decided to leave Eatonton to take advantage of this once in a lifetime opportunity and found himself on Mr. Turner's plantation. This became his greatest and most important life-decision (Brookes 5).

While living on the plantation, Harris met many African American slaves and built friendly relationships with them. At night, he wandered out to their cabins and listened to their stories. He built a particularly strong relationship with one slave named Mink. When Mink ran away, Harris snuck food and other necessary items to him (Brookes 7). Because of such adventures and the kindness he showed Mink, Harris became close with the rest of the slaves. They would get very excited when he came down at night, and they loved to tell him their stories. Since Harris spent so many nights with them, he had extensive experience listening to their dialect. When he began writing, Harris recalled what he had heard in the cabins and did his best to replicate their dialects in
his work (Brookes 7-10). Had Harris not ventured down to Mr. Turner's plantation, he never would have written these priceless classics.

Contrary to what many readers believe, Harris did not create these tales. They originated with the slaves. In *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, Harris's first compilation, he relays their stories. He says,

*The Countryman* was published on a plantation, and it was on this and neighboring plantations that I became familiar with the curious myths and animal stories that form the basis of the volumes accredited to Uncle Remus. I absorbed the stories, songs, and myths that I had heard. (Brookes 14)

This first book became a bestseller, so Harris decided to write another. This posed a problem. He ran out of stories to tell. He knew he needed to turn to the primary source for help. One night, Harris went down to a railroad yard and sparked conversation with the ex-slaves working there. He asked them if they knew anything about *Uncle Remus*. When he realized they did not, he enlightened them with one of his tales. By the end, the men jumped with delight and began telling their own stories. Harris included many of them in his later works (Baer 186).

**The Uncle Remus Legends**

According to Harris in the Introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, his work first appeared in various issues of *The Atlanta Constitution*, a newspaper Harris worked for after his time on Mr. Turner's plantation (Harris 4). Once Harris realized how popular his stories became, he decided to publish a collection. Harris created Uncle Remus as the narrator. Uncle Remus
represents Harris's version of an aged slave who spends his time working on
minute tasks and entertaining others on the plantation (Brookes 19-21). By
reading *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, I learned that Uncle Remus
spends most of his time entertaining Johnny, the white slave-owner's son.
Johnny tries to visit Uncle Remus each night to hear one of his stories. Written
in full dialect, *Uncle Remus* shares many stories involving Brer Rabbit and Brer
Fox. Other characters include Brer Wolf, Brer Bear, Brer Tarrypin, Brer Possum,
and more. Within, many conflicts arise involving Brer Rabbit against the other
characters. As I witnessed firsthand, Brer Rabbit outwits the other characters
and triumphs over every battle. *Uncle Remus* represents Harris's biggest
achievement because it opened the door to his success. Although he attempted
other mediums in writing, nothing ever compared to these one-of-a-kind,
nostalgic, plantation-based tales.

**The Accidental Author**

Although Harris knew he had accomplished something extraordinary, the
achievement surprised even him. He never thought his name would become
known worldwide. Harris often referred to himself as the "accidental author"
(Brookes 14). After he wrote *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, Harris
says of himself:

> This was the accidental beginning of a career that has been
> accidental throughout. It was an accident that I went to *The
> Countryman*, an accident that I wrote "Uncle Remus" and an
> accident that the stories put forth under that name struck the
> popular fancy. (Brookes 14)
Harris never gave himself the praise in which he deserved, and he never had any confidence. He never imagined that his work would become as trendy as it did. Shy around strangers, Harris did not participate in public readings, which disappointed many of his fans. Furthermore, he never read to his own children. Harris's introversion caught the attention of other contemporary well-known authors. They could not understand why this talented genius refused to share his gift with others. The notable Mark Twain says, "Mr. Harris ought to be able to read the Negro dialect better than anybody else, for in the matter of writing it he is the only master the country has produced" (Twain 54). Yet, not even the opinions of more famous authors could persuade Harris to show more confidence. It pleased him to know that people identified with and took pleasure in his works, but he felt uneasy with the attention (Twain 54). Fortunately for his readers, his popularity only increased.

**His Own Worst Enemy**

Furthermore, Harris at times acted as his own worst adversary. He frequently vacillated over his choice to write in dialect, and he constantly revised it. If he decided a word did not fit, he changed it (Pederson 58). Also, in the introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, Harris apologizes for the dialect he uses. In his next compilation, *Nights with Uncle Remus* (1883), Harris insults this apology and calls it lame (Brookes 113). Following this statement, he says maybe he owes
the reader another apology. The dialect frustrates him sometimes and he acts indecisively about it. He says,

In the Introduction to the first volume of Uncle Remus, a lame apology was made for inflicting a book of dialect upon the public. Perhaps a similar apology should be made here; 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. (Brookes 113)

Although he felt it obligatory, Harris had difficulty deciding whether he approved of his decision to use dialect. After his death, many re-published adaptations appeared without the dialect. All in all, his daughter-in-law believes he would have fought against this (118).

Some of Harris's self doubts likewise stemmed from the readers' reactions when they first met him. He let many outside distractions get under his skin. For example, Harris once visited George Washington Cable in New Orleans and as his supporters began to enter the room, they whispered amongst themselves and gave him bizarre looks. This made him feel even more uncomfortable (Brookes 111). In Joel Chandler Harris-Folklorist, Stella Brewer Brookes shares, “Once when he was visiting in New Orleans a large number of citizens turned out to meet him, and when he appeared there were whispers throughout the crowd, “Look, he’s white” (Brookes 111). It shocked and
disappointed many of his fans to see that a white man had written their beloved stories. They expected Uncle Remus, not Uncle Joel. They wanted Harris to be a large, burly African American man but when they saw him and realized he looked the exact opposite, they felt dissatisfied. This audience response represents another aspect of his career that made him doubt himself (111).

In the same way, Harris felt self-conscious about his level of expertise about folklore. Throughout his career, people referred to him as an amazing folklorist because of his utilization of dialect and how he represented the relationships between blacks and whites in the South. Harris had no experience with folklore and honestly did not know what it entailed (Brookes 25). He spent much of his time researching it and trying to establish his own definition for it. He never considered himself a folklorist even though later in his career he became involved in many folklore-based groups. In a letter he wrote in 1883, he says,

> The Remus legends, it should be said here, were not written with an eye to their importance as folk-lore stories. I had no more conception of that than the man on the moon. The first one was written out almost by accident, and as a study in dialect. (25)

Although Harris claims he did not mind his lack of knowledge in folklore, he spent a lot of time researching its meaning. Calling himself an “accidental author,” he became an accidental folklorist as well.
Dialect Discrimination

Not only Harris, but other critics had more than one opinion of the dialect and the relationships it portrayed. Harris wrote these tales not long after The Civil War and Reconstruction. Race remained a sensitive topic during this time, and Harris took a risk when he chose to include the dialect. My first encounter with *Uncle Remus* occurred in a class last semester (Fall 2010). Although we only spent a little time discussing Harris, I learned a great deal. The discussion taught me that the North and the South had dissimilar views on Harris's use of dialect. However, after further research, I discovered more similarities than differences. For the most part, both parts of the United States widely accepted it. The North and the South, however, had their separate reasons for doing so. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. compiled a collection called *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris*. It includes reviews, articles, and essays from around the country. They cover opinions from the year Harris published *Uncle Remus* (1880) until very recently. Thanks to this compilation and a few other outside sources, I discovered the following opinions on the relationships between Northern and Southern readers.

**Northern Acceptance**

Throughout the North, *Uncle Remus* thrived. Harris's unique portrayal of the Southern dialects created a vision that not many Northerners had experienced. His interpretation of the relationships between white plantation owners and their slaves also brought new insight. Before Harris, the Northerners assumed only negative relationships existed. Although slavery has
no positive connotations, Harris showed people in the North a different side to these two opposing groups. He created the illusion that strong relationships formed, and sometimes masters and slaves considered each other friends or even family. Even though they still disapproved of slavery, the Northerners felt that Harris created a different, less inhumane atmosphere. They now felt somewhat emotionally connected to the South. *Uncle Remus* became their first experience with the genuine lives of slaves in the South. It also created a connection between the whites in the North and those from the South. Some Northerners asked the Southerners who relocated to the North to read in dialect for them. They had no experience with it, and they liked to hear them read aloud. The dialect gave people from the North and the South something to talk about and to unite over (Ritterhouse 612-15).

Although Northerners found difficulty in reading dialect, Harris did what he could to make it easier for them. They showed much gratitude for this. In a review written out of Boston, an anonymous journalist comments on Harris’s second compilation, *Nights with Uncle Remus*. He says, “Our author has had compassion on his northern readers, and adds many helpful foot-notes in explanation of the obscurer terms” (*Uncle Remus* 11). Harris paid such particular attention to his dialect that he knew which words caused more difficulty for Northerners. The creation of these foot notes goes to show that Harris kept his Northern fans in mind. Another anonymous journalist mentions Harris’s use of dialect and compliments Harris on his ability to help the Northerners distinguish the origins of the different dialects (“Negro” 6).
Throughout many of his works, Harris makes minute changes to the setting, and he distinguishes the different accentual dialects between different areas. This particular journalist calls Harris clever because of the distinction he made between Middle Georgia and Southern Georgia dialects ("Negro" 6). It sounds like a difficult task. If someone asked me to distinguish between Northern Illinois and Southern Illinois accents, I would not know where to begin. The conclusion to this review ends with the following:

Mr. Harris's book is altogether excellent of its kind, and in preserving certain quaint legends, and giving us exactly the sounds of the negro dialect, he has established on a firm basis the first real book of American folklore. ("Negro" 6)

This confirms that the Northern states along with the Southern appreciated what Harris accomplished with dialect and the content. Even during a controversial period in history, people set aside their stereotypical views and agreed Harris's work was worth exploring. Thanks to Harris, the Northerners saw past the horror.

**Northern Resistance**

Unfortunately, but not unlike any other written work, Harris's dialect had its Northern critics. Although some of these critics agreed writing in dialect required a unique talent, they did not believe that it would remain well-liked because it proved difficult to read. An anonymous columnist from *New York Times* says,

The dialect—that very dangerous medium for the maker of literature—is clear enough to those who are fortunate enough to
have had some acquaintance with the Southern negro, but we can readily imagine that fifty years from now it will be undecipherable jargon to the general reader. (Frost 25)

This columnist goes on to say that because the blacks could now receive an education, their dialects would change and the old ones would diminish. Harris's version would become impossible to read. The fact that I, a white girl from the North 130 years later, can read and understand Harris's work shows that this columnist's theory was flawed. For the most part, I found the dialect easy to understand, and I felt the connection with Uncle Remus and Johnny just as much as the Northerners from the late nineteenth century. I also enjoyed attempting to define some of the words Harris used, and had no difficulty making sense of the text.

On a more serious note, Northern critics negatively criticized Harris's dialect because they alleged it racist. In a few articles, critics from the North claimed that Harris only tried to show the stupidity of the slaves and their inferiority to white men. The dialect emphasized their little educational experience. Bernard Wolfe, from Commentary, a magazine based in New York, wrote a very negative article on Harris in 1949 (Wolfe 71). Seventy years later, some people still found fault in Harris's dialect. Wolfe believes that although Harris's stories look positive, a "malevolent blow" exists just under the surface (71). He argues that Harris classified the cartoon characters by race. Brer Rabbit always out-tricks the fox and the other stronger animals. Wolfe says, "On the basis of the tally-sheet alone, is it too far-fetched to take Brer Rabbit as a
symbol—about as sharp as Southern sanctions would allow—of the Negro slave's festering hatred of the white man" (72). He also claims that the animals represent human beings and the appalling relationship between blacks and whites. He says, "The South, wearing the blinders of stereotype, has always tried to see the Negro as a "roaringly comic" domestic animal” (74). He also declares that Harris's stories contain “Southern racial taboos” (74). Wolfe describes Brer Rabbit as weak, and the rest of the animals as strong. He then compares Brer Rabbit to the blacks, and the other animals to the whites. He believes this symbolized the only way for the slaves to revolt against their owners. Wolfe sees no innocence and truly believes Harris racially structured his characters. (Wolfe 74)

The dialect plays a big part in creating these negative opinions from the Northerners. Had Harris left out the dialect, critics would not have discussed the presence of racial stereotypes with such vigor. Although people would still have had their racial issues, the lack of dialect would make them harder to detect because each character would speak the same way. It would be harder to detect which animal represented each race. As with the other characters, Wolfe took issue with Harris's creation of Uncle Remus. He stresses that Harris only created this character to take the attention off of him (75). He did not want to take the blame for the negative response to the dialect because he feared confrontation. Wolfe says Harris used Uncle Remus as his excuse to get out of the line of fire from the critics. Uncle Remus signified his way of putting the
blame on someone else. Harris wanted to make clear that he did not write these stories; he was simply retelling them (76).

Another Northerner, Jesse Bier, agrees with Wolfe. In his 1968 book based on the Civil War and Reconstruction, he contributes his opinions of Harris’s choice to use dialect. Bier says,

> The Negro dialect is but a supreme ruse, as a superficial device
> one of the great implicit jokes in the history of American humor.
> The blackface mask and voice were taken in earnest by the south,
> and Uncle Remus’ partisanship for the rabbit, who joyously and
> cunningly outricks his oppressors, was Harris’s own. (98)

Again, another critic believes Uncle Remus’s voice was actually that of Harris himself. He alleges that Harris felt this way, not Uncle Remus. A handful of Northern readers believed that Uncle Remus actually represented Harris’s racist opinions on race and social structure in the South, and that he hid behind Remus’ mask. Harris stuck with his original claim. He only used the dialect to preserve the stories in their natural state. He believed he should tell them to preserve their authenticity. Harris saw nothing wrong with sharing these stories as he had heard them as a child.

Southern Acceptance

Similar to the North, the South had many *Uncle Remus* fans. Their reason for acceptance, however, proved different. In “Reading, Intimacy, and the Role of Uncle Remus in White Southern Social Memory”, Jennifer Ritterhouse argues that white Southerners appreciated Harris’s take on dialect and his depiction of the relationships between slave owners and their slaves. Reading the stories
brought back many memories of their own childhoods on the plantations.

Ritterhouse claims,

> White southern readers lauded Harris's representation of black dialect for much the same reason that they praised his narrative frames. Harris's language, like his sketches, carried white southerners back to a time they found more pleasant than the 1880s and 1890s and re-introduced them to black folks they considered more pleasant as well. (611)

In other words, the *Uncle Remus* stories have some truth to them. Maybe plantation life had its positive attributes. Maybe the slave owners and the slaves had emotional relationships. Ritterhouse also mentions that Harris received letters from white Southerners thanking him for writing in dialect because the stories brought back good recollections from their childhood and of the good times they had (611). They identified with Harris's stories because they had heard them on their own plantations. Also, according to Ritterhouse, it gave Southerners the chance to share their childhood experiences with their own children, and to show their children that good things came from them. These critics believe even during a time when race relations still caused controversy, Harris's stories, experiences and dialect helped teach children that blacks and whites could get along (611).

In addition, other Southern critics praised Harris's dialect because he succeeded in making it sound authentic. Readers became tired of writers trying to create a dialect that matched nothing they had ever heard. Thomas Nelson Page, from the *Book Buyer* based out of Virginia, says to these ignorant writers,
The result has been a deluge of what are called “dialect stories,”
until the public, surfeited by them, has begun almost to shudder
at the very name. These writers have supposed that they were
writing dialect when they were only writing distorted words and
illegitimate grammar, not knowing that the master here has used
the vehicle only to carry the thought, and that the secret of his
craft lies not in the manner so much as in the matter...and to us
Mr. Harris has done an inestimable service. (55)

Finally Harris’s Southern audiences found something written in a dialect they
could recognize. They never experienced a dialect that sounded so real and
natural, and they appreciated that someone had finally mastered it (55).

Furthermore, some Southern critics appreciated an author who perceived
slaves as people rather than as a problem. Thomas H. English, from Southern
Literary Messenger based out of Virginia, says the fact that Harris
acknowledged the dialect in his work shows that he really cared about
preserving every detail that he could about them, and that he recognized the
slaves as human beings (68). In an article from 1940, English states,

Joel Chandler Harris’s chief claim to fame must be that he
interpreted the Negro to a generation to whom the Negro had
almost ceased to be a person and had become chiefly a problem.
It was not an accident that the plantation-trained boy became the
great interpreter of the race. His opportunities for prolonged
observation under the most favorable conditions had been
exceptional, though it is one of the mysteries of genius that he
should have gathered so large a body of literary materials. He
knew the Negro as a person before he knew that he was a problem

(68)

English continues by praising Harris for identifying the good in the relationships between slaves as their owners. English, a Southern man himself, recognizes the atrociousness of slavery, but he appreciates Harris's concentration on his representation of human relationships with Uncle Remus and Johnny. Like many other readers, English valued Harris's recognition of the beneficial relationships formed on the plantations, and commends him for it.

John M. McBryde from the *Sewanee Review* agrees. He says,

> If *Uncle Tom's Cabin* set forth to the world the darkest aspects of slavery, *Uncle Remus* represents its brightest side, for the book makes very clear to every thoughtful reader that the system of slavery, pernicious as it may appear to us now, took the dusky savage from his haunts in the African jungle and made of him a Christian and a gentleman, something which freedom and the most improved methods of education have thus far failed to accomplish. (185)

McBryde also applauds Harris's representation of African Americans. He has never experienced them in such a positive light because no one possessed the ability to ever display it so positively before (185).

**Southern Resistance**

Whereas Northerners and Southerners cherished the stories because of the humor and the nostalgia for the antebellum South, twentieth-century and twenty-first century scholars have criticized Harris in that his dialect reinforces the oppressive master-slave relations that persisted under slavery and only
perpetuated negative stereotypes or "happy slaves." Some critics have tried to interpret the tales more positively in that they suggest that Brer Rabbit represents the black trickster who successfully challenges his oppressors, whom critics see as white masters.

Similar to the North, the South had its share of Harris haters. In 1974, Louis D. Rubin Jr. wrote the “Uncle Remus and the Ubiquitous Rabbit”, in which he condemned Harris, his use of dialect, and the stereotypes he included. He claims Harris disregarded the possibility of unhappy endings. Rubin did not appreciate Harris’s ignorance to the fact that he wrote about the imprisoned slaves on the plantations (Rubin 171). Rubin says,

Was Harris fully aware of what he was doing in those stories? We know that Harris was quite aware that he was writing about black people. It seems inevitable that, having heard the stories under the circumstances that he did, he would have known that they were not, in their symbolic action, without relevance to the daily lives of the black...In their time the stories seemed only to confirm the stereotype of the contented darky. They told readers that the black man was happy. They seemed to glorify life on the old plantation. (171)

Rubin’s opinions surprise me. It is admirable to see Rubin, a white man from the South, defending the blacks. He wrote this article not long after the Civil Rights Movement, when racism drastically and dangerously resurfaced. The dialect, according to many of these critics, including Rubin, proves that Harris
stereotyped his characters (171). Along with Rubin, many others did not appreciate this because it belittled the slaves.

Louis J. Budd, a professor at Duke University in North Carolina, represents another critic who claims Harris's dialect reinforces the common labels associated with the African American community. Budd writes,

The most glaring ambivalence in Harris's readers concerned his black characters, who kept close to the stereotypes favored by a white society moving toward the "separate but equal" decision of 1896. The background blacks, the bit players, often supply the broadest edge of the humor with their ignorance or their overreaching vocabulary (did any black actually say "surgeon ur de armies" for "sergeant at arms"?)...These gibes confirmed the all-too-familiar clichés about the blacks as shiftless, easy to scare, slow witted, and ever thirsty for a dram. (203)

Some of the ways Harris phrased the dialect, according to Budd, only reiterated the racial stereotypes that people had about blacks after the Civil War. Budd believes the dialect represents their uneducated and ignorant side (203). The reoccurrence of these stereotypes moves away from the positive changes taking place between the North, the South, and the different races after the war. Numerous other critics and readers in the South shared this opinion.

Reconciliation

Harris died in 1908, almost thirty years after he first published Uncle Remus (Cousins 103). Critics from both the North and the South presented strong opinions. Whether the country approved or rejected Harris and his
dialect becomes irrelevant. While all this debate proceeded, other critics formed more neutral opinions about Harris. Paul M. Cousins, a professor and author from Louisiana State University, analyzes articles referring to Harris's death. In these articles, the writers question whether the North or the South would mourn Harris's death more since he contributed so much to both parts of the country. Cousins responds,

The Boston *Herald* said that it would be hard to say whether the North or the South would mourn more sincerely the death of Joel Chandler Harris or the more keenly feel his loss. His stories were familiar to the South, it said, but to the North they were a revelation of little-known characters and conditions of life, which were all the more delightful because they were foreign to anything of which the North had had personal experience. His stories, the Washington *Post* asserted, had done more to make the life of the Old South familiar and charming to Northern readers than had the work of any other Southern writer, and that they must be counted as one of the most potent influences which, during the last two decades, had so greatly influenced and softened Northern opinion of the South. (104)

No matter the opinion, Harris has had an enormous impact on the United States, and the public will debate over him long into the future.

**Disney Adopts Uncle Remus**

Literary critics, alternatively, did not represent the only people interested in Harris. *Uncle Remus* became so popular that Walt Disney himself decided to buy out the Harris canon. On November 20th, 1946, Disney released *Song of the*
South, a half-animated, half-live version of Uncle Remus. About forty years later, they introduced Splash Mountain, the water ride based on this controversial movie (Sperb 930-4). As with Harris’s version, much debate appeared after the movie’s release. Critics presented many of the same negative reactions to the dialect and the content in the film as they did to the original stories. They also discussed the changes Disney made. In 1992, Peggy A. Russo shared some negative opinions in her article “Uncle Walt’s Uncle Remus: Disney’s Distortion of Harris’s Hero.” Russo believes that Disney ruined the legend of Uncle Remus because they changed the stories so much in their film. They made the morals more evident, and ignored and altered much of the framework. Rather than focusing on the animated characters, the film’s focus falls on the real-life characters (Russo 29). The tales focused more on the animated characters. The plot changed drastically. It bothers her that the critics focused mostly on the depiction of the African American race rather the plot changes (29.) Russo comments on the change in Uncle Remus’ character as well. She says,

Walt Disney did American pop culture a great disservice when he produced Song of the South. Viewing the Harris canon through the prism of that film, critics ever since have been unable or unwilling to see Harris’s work without bias. Such bias has often resulted in
condemnation of Harris as a singer of stolen songs, a creator of stereotypes, a perpetrator of plantation myths. (29)

She continues to say that ever since the premier of Song of the South, no person has experimented with the Uncle Remus stories. She blames the movie for tainting Harris's reputation. The only real research that has appeared since the movie's debut constitutes a rewriting without the dialect, detracting away from the true meaning and culture (29).

Jason Sperb shares much of the same opinion claiming Disney knew their intentions when they made these drastic changes. He says,

Disney clearly understood the underlying racial tension associated with the project, changing the film's title from Uncle Remus to Song of the South, in order to distance the film from potential criticism from African-Americans concerned about the use of the 'Uncle Remus' tales. (930)

Sperb would agree that these changes proved unsuccessful because people continued to identify the stereotypes. Prestigious groups, such as the NAACP, did not appreciate the racial typecasts. NAACP's Executive Secretary, Walter F. White, claims Disney could not hide them. Russo writes,

Walter F. White...issued a statement to the country's leading newspapers, protesting the perpetuation of "a dangerously glorified picture of slavery." While recognizing the film's "artistic merit," White regretted that Disney had made use of what he called the "beautiful Uncle Remus folklore" to give the "impression of an idyllic master-slave relationship which is a distortion of the facts." (Russo 26)
Many of the film critics agreed that the stereotypes persisted. Difficulty arises when trying to avoid these them in a country where race has always caused problems. According to Jason Sperb, in truth the film did not revolve around slavery. It took place in the 1880s; after the abolition of slavery. The workers represented ex-slaves who chose to remain on the plantations. Because of these opinions and accusations, after its debut in theaters Disney never released the film on VHS in the United States (Sperb 932). If Disney had chosen to release it, I believe more criticism would have occurred, and they could not afford anymore negative publicity at the time.

However, not every review for *Song of the South* created tension. Although many film critics had numerous tribulations with it, Disney's fans made it a hit at the box office. They loved it. Disney successfully combined animation with real-life figures (931). The fans did not focus so much on the dialect or the stereotypes it may have represented. This new innovation made headlines. *Variety* shares a positive review in 1983:

> Some excellent Technicolor effects heighten the picture of an idealized, romanticized South, with its plantations, stately manors, campfire meetings and colored mammys. Alternate live and cartoon stories are interwoven smartly, with the occasional combination of real and animated figures handled with imagination and skill...southern Negro accents; butterflies with girlish giggles; bees and birds alighting on a live person's shoulder—are only a few of the brilliant touches. (931)
Clearly not every critic or fan dwelled on the stereotypical content; rather they concentrated on the special effects and the innovations. This film made history because of its advancements, and Disney deserves some credit for the challenges they conquered. The average moviegoer appreciated it for the good and chose to ignore the possibility of the bad. They did not let the dialect interfere with their enjoyment of the film.

Splash Mountain, the water-ride featured at Disney theme parks, had better reviews than the movie it imitated. Disney tried his best to eliminate any racial undertones (936). They focused strictly on the animation and removed most of the live action content as if the film never included Uncle Remus and Johnny. Although some critics believed this admitted that the movie contained racist gestures, the ride remains popular today. Most people have no familiarity with the original *Song of the South*. Sperb shares,

Racist undertones may swell beneath Splash Mountain for some, but not for the millions of visitors who walk through Disney's gates each year without the faintest clue what *Song of the South* is and was. (936)

Like most situations, Disney will continue to have both supporters and objectors. Nevertheless, Disney still made its mark with respect to Harris and his masterpieces.

**My Insights**

Similarly, I have many opinions regarding Harris and his work. Ever since my class last semester introduced me to Joel Chandler Harris and Uncle Remus, I have had interest in them. The first story we read, “The Wonderful Tar-Baby
"Story," remains the most famous and controversial of the collection, and my personal favorite. For this project, I read all of the stories in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* to better understand the material. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and it truly touched my heart. I love the relationship between Uncle Remus and Johnny, and I enjoyed Harris's depiction of a positive relationship during a very controversial time in American history. I had never experienced anything like this before. I can understand how the Northerners felt in 1880. Had I been Harris' reviewer, I too may have focused on and appreciated his dialect most. However, this statement could present some difficulty because I live in 2011. I may have had a different opinion back then based on the circumstances which surrounded me.

I believe eliminating the dialect undermines the history of this country and Joel Chandler Harris himself. I do not perceive the dialect as stereotypical. I do not agree with Harris’ negative northern and southern reviewers. The way individuals speak has nothing to do with their intelligence. It simply reflects the region where they live or come from. Two people from different intellectual levels can speak with the same accent. Good and bad people exist from all races. I always say we look the same underneath. I try to look at everything and everyone in a positive light until someone proves me wrong. For me, the dialect symbolizes my favorite element. I enjoyed reading it, and I found joy in attempting to decipher the new words. I felt as if I sat right there next to Johnny and learned the same lessons from Uncle Remus.
My favorite part of this whole experience resides in the fact that I saw *Song of the South*. Not many people today can say that they have seen this movie since Disney never released it here. I found it heartwarming and cheerful. I enjoyed the changes Disney made, and I like hearing the dialect in live action rather than reading it to myself. Uncle Remus plays more of a father-figure than Johnny's own father does. With Johnny's father absent, Uncle Remus takes on his roll and teaches Johnny life lessons through Brer Rabbit's experiences. I understand why Disney never released the movie for home viewing here, but it also saddens me. The fact that many individuals know songs like "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" and enjoy Splash Mountain but do not know of the movie, or more importantly, Harris's texts, which Walt Disney attempted to bring into America's national consciousness, is unfortunate. Harris's *Uncle Remus* represents a part of our history, a part of America's development. For those who resist it, reading the stories and/or watching Disney's adaptation would only demonstrate how far our country has come with respect to equality and leadership (*Song*).

I have also read Disney's children's version of "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story." Published in 1977 and renamed "The Story of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby,"
this version, written for young readers, lost my interest because Disney eliminated the dialect. In my opinion, it took too much away because the dialect captures an important element of Harris’s story. I actually caught myself reading it in dialect. I cannot get it out of my head, and that does not bother me. I want it in there. I want to remember where these stories originated. I want to feel the culture behind them. Without these qualities, I could do without the stories.

Overall, I love Harris, his dialect, Disney’s depiction of Uncle Remus, and everything they represent. Thanks to these masterpieces, I feel closer to this part of history. Although slavery embodies everything I detest, I appreciate the interpretations of the brighter side. Many people doubt that these relationships really existed, but I do not. Before my exposure to these masterpieces, the thought of positive relationships during slavery never would have crossed my mind. Thanks to Harris, his great talents, and his heartwarming depictions of plantation life, I see them now, and I believe they existed.

Conclusion

Joel Chandler Harris’s success thrives despite opposition. He represents one of the most unique and famous authors in American literary history. Harris, a shy and self-conscious man, had an extraordinary gift. No one has mimicked the dialect he mastered. Although he created much tension and controversy with this dialect, he never once turned his back on it. He wanted to preserve the stories in their natural state. The dialect made its mark, good and bad, in both the North and the South, and it survived. 130 years later, some
professors insist on including him in college classrooms. Harold W. Thompson says,

There is no doubt that the Uncle Remus stories head the list of our country's folktales, and there should be no doubt that their author must be included in the roster of the dozen American writers who have contributed most to the world's literature. (Qtd. in Brookes xiv)

I could not have put this any better. I just hope that years from now people will say the same things about Harris. I hope he makes an appearance in literature and history classrooms so that future generations have the opportunity to learn what I learned about him and his talents. Despite what critics have said, Harris, Uncle Remus, Brer Rabbit, and written dialect stand strong in our country's literary history.
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Appendix A

The following is a dictionary of words in dialect that I did not understand at first while reading the *Uncle Remus* stories. After reading further, I was able to figure them out, based on the content that surrounded them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialect Word</th>
<th>English Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bleedzd</td>
<td>Obliged</td>
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<td>Brer</td>
<td>Brother</td>
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<td>Bimeby</td>
<td>By and by</td>
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<td>Chilluns</td>
<td>Children</td>
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<td>Chuseday</td>
<td>Tuesday</td>
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<td>Confab</td>
<td>Confabulation</td>
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<td>Congergashun</td>
<td>Congregation</td>
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<td>Co'se</td>
<td>Of course</td>
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<td>Creashun</td>
<td>Creation</td>
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<td>Enfloons</td>
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<td>Fuddermo'</td>
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<td>'Lecshuneer</td>
<td>Electioneered</td>
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<td>Merlatters</td>
<td>Mulattos</td>
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<td>Mout/moutent er</td>
<td>Might have/might not have</td>
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<td>Natchul</td>
<td>Natural</td>
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<td>Nigher</td>
<td>Nearer</td>
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<td>Patter-rollers</td>
<td>Patrollers</td>
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<td>'Pennunce</td>
<td>Dependence</td>
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<td>Pozzit</td>
<td>Deposit</td>
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<td>Segashuate</td>
<td>Sagacious</td>
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<td>'Swadin'</td>
<td>Persuading</td>
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<td>Tarrypin</td>
<td>Terrapin (Turtle)</td>
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<td>Tooby sho</td>
<td>To be sure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Widder</td>
<td>Widow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wizzitin'</td>
<td>Visiting</td>
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</table>
"Didn't the fox never catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?" asked the little boy the next evening.

"He come mighty nigh it, honey, sho's you born--Brer Fox did. One day after Brer Rabbit fool 'im wid dat calamus root, Brer Fox went ter wuk en got 'im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentine, en fix up a contrapshun w'at he call a Tar-Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot 'er in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de news wuz gwine ter be. En he didn't hatter wait long, nudder, kaze bimeby here come Brer Rabbit pacin' down de road--lippity-clippity-clippity, clippity-lippity--dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit come prancin' 'long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz 'stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Mawnin'!' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee - `nice wedder dis mawnin',' sezee.

"Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox he lay low.

"How duz yo' sym'tums seem ter segashuate?" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

"Brer Fox, he wink his eye slow, en lay low, en de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'.

"How you come on, den? Is you deaf?" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. 'Kaze if you is, I kin holler louder,' sezee.

"Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"You er stuck up, dat's w'at you is,' says Brer Rabbit, sezee, 'en I;m gwine ter kyore you, dat's w'at I'm a gwine ter do,' sezee.

"Brer Fox, he sorter chuckle in his stummick, he did, but Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothin'.

"I'm gwine ter larn you how ter talk ter 'spectubble folks ef hit's de las' ack,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. 'Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gwine ter bus' you wide open,' sezee.

"Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit keep on axin' 'im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin' nothin', twel present'y Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis', he did, en blip he tuck 'er side er de head. Right dar's whar he broke his
merlasses jug. His fis' stuck, en he can't pull loose. De tar hilt 'im. But Tar-Baby, she stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Ef you don't lemme loose, I'll knock you agin,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

En wid dat he fotch 'er a wipe wid de udder han', en dat stuck. Tar-Baby, she ain'y sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natal stuffin' outen you,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

But de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'. She des hilt on, en de Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way. Brer Fox, he lay low. Den Brer Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar-Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt 'er cranksided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' dez ez innercent ez wunner yo' mammy's mockin'-birds.

"Howdy, Brer Rabbit,' sez Brer Fox, sezee. `You look sorter stuck up dis mawnin',' sezee.

En den he rolled on de groun', en laft en laft twel he couldn't laff no mo'.

"I speck you'll take dinner wid me dis time, Brer Rabbit. I done laid in some calamus root, en I ain't gwineter take no skuse,' sez Brer Fox, sezee."

(Here Uncle Remus paused, and drew a two-pound yam out of the ashes)

"Did the fox eat the rabbit?" asked the little boy to whom the story had been told.

"Dat's all de fur de tale goes," replied the old man. "He mout, an den agin he moutent. Some say Judge B'ar come 'long en loosed 'im - some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin'. You better run 'long."
Appendix C

"The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story"
My Representation without Dialect

"Did the fox ever catch the rabbit Uncle Remus?" asked the little boy the next evening.

"He came pretty close, sure as the day you were born. One day, after Brother Rabbit fooled him with the calamus root, Brother Fox went to get some tar. He mixed it with turpentine, and made a contraption that he called a Tar-Baby. He took this Tar-Baby, sat him in the road, and then hid in the bushes. He didn't know what was going to happen. He didn't have to wait long because by and by Brother Rabbit appeared down the road, acting as sassy as a jaybird. Brother Fox laid low."

"Good morning!" Brother Rabbit said. "Nice weather this morning."

"Tar-Baby didn't say anything and Brother Fox laid low."

"How are you?" Brother Rabbit said.

"Brother Fox, he winked his eye slowly, laid low, and the Tar-Baby didn't say anything."

"How do you come? Are you deaf?" said Brother Rabbit, "Because if you are, I can yell louder."

"Tar Baby stayed still, and Brother Fox laid low."

"You are stuck up, that's what you are," says Brother Rabbit, "And I am going to cure you. That's what I am going to do."

"Brother Fox sort of chuckled in his stomach, and Tar-Baby didn't say anything."

"I am going to teach you how to talk to respectable folks if it's the last thing I do," said Brother Rabbit. "If you don't take off that hat and say hello, I am going to bust you wide open," he said.
“Tar-Baby stayed still and Brother Fox laid low. Brother Rabbit kept on asking him, and Tar-Baby didn’t say anything until Brother Rabbit drew back with his fist and punched him in the side of the head. That is when he broke his molasses jug. His fist got stuck, and he could not pull it loose. The tar held him, but Tar-Baby stayed still and Brother Fox laid low.”

“If you don’t let me loose, I will knock you again,” said Brother Rabbit.

“And with that, Brother Rabbit hit Tar-Baby with his other hand and it got stuck. Tar-Baby didn’t say anything and Brother Fox laid low.

“Turn me loose before I kick the stuffing out of you,” said Brother Rabbit.

“But the Tar-Baby didn’t say anything. She just held on and then Brother Rabbit lost the use of his feet the same way. Brother Fox laid low. Then Brother Rabbit yelled that if Tar-Baby would not turn him loose, he would head butt her. Tar-Baby didn’t turn him loose so he butted her and his head got stuck. Then Brother Fox sauntered over looking just as innocent as one of Mammy’s mockingbirds.

“Howdy Brother Rabbit,” said Brother Fox. “You look sort of stuck up this morning.”

“Then Brother Fox fell to the ground and laughed until he couldn’t laugh anymore.”

“I expect you will come to dinner with me this time Brother Rabbit. I prepared some calamus root, and I won’t take any excuses,” Brother Fox said.

(Here Uncle Remus paused and drew a two pound yam out of the ashes)

“Did the Fox eat the rabbit?” asked the little boy to whom the story had been told.

“That’s all far as the tale goes,” replied Uncle Remus. “He might have, and he might not. Some say the Judge might have loosened, and some say he didn’t. I hear Miss Sally calling you. You better run along.”