

LEVELS OF ALLEGORY IN UNCLE REMUS TALES

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ABSTRACT

The myths and fables originating from the Afro-American social structure are not simple tales, very often they are satiric allegories arising from the racial conflicts present in nineteenth century society. They are allegorical by virtue of their presentation of the slave's situation through images drawn from the animal world. This indirection is both their vehicle and power. A directly stated moral does not leave much to the imagination of the reader while a moral implicit in the fable is always more subtle and suggestive as in the case of the Uncle Remus Tales. Aesop's Fables state the moral either explicitly through the conclusion or implicitly through the character of some animal. When compared with Aesop's Fables, the Uncle Remus Tales emerges as the ones more suggestive and more allegorical in their impact.

Keywords: *Afro-American Social Structure, Allegorical, Rabbit and Uncle Remus.*

Introduction

Joel Chandler Harries was the first 19th century writer to use the Afro-American Tales for fictional purposes. His object was as he says: ...to give vivid hints of the really poetic imagination of the negro the quaint and homely humour which was his most prominent characteristic, a picturesque sensitiveness...a curious exultation of mind and temperament not to be defined by words.

There are various levels of allegory in the Tales. The first and fore-most is the presentation of a slave's existence through animal fables. A single human trait or norm is taken up and satirized. The Rabbit, the trickster of the Tales, is shown to be playing pranks on stronger animals. He obviously stands for the weak, down-trodden Negro's own self. The Tales bravado has a compensatory value for the suppressed psyche of the Negro.

Another latent allegory which runs through the Tales is suggested by the two diagonally opposite characters of the Rabbit and Uncle Remus. They represent the two divergent currents of southern life, one that of a white man, the other of the Negro. Various factors, as diverse as psychology and politics, converge to strengthen the allegorical interpretation of the Tales.

The third level is the autobiographical. Various questions which crop up in the reader's mind find their answer in Harris's personal life. Certain critics have analysed the two characters of Uncle Remus and the Rabbit as the two schizophrenic levels of Harris's psyche. The two vary widely, one being tricky and violent, the other being peaceful, mature and tolerant; one being the protagonist of jungle morality, the other being the representative of happy plantation myth.

The final level of allegory can be traced on a wider scale in the two levels of format and narration. The format is Negro and the Tales are original in their purity and they deal with the crises of a wild existence, a predatory world where survival at any cost matters. Narration is through Uncle Remus who, by and large, is accepted as the protagonist of Harris himself thus, in turn, representing the view point of the white man. These two distinct components of the Tales typify the literature of the South which has all along assimilated realism and romance, two apparently contradictory qualities. The factual and

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the picturesque mix up in southern literature to represent that queer admixture of certain notional and psychological variations of the two cults, the white and the black, which is peculiar to the South. Brer Rabbit and Uncle Remus stand for all these variations which ultimately culminate in a hybrid style which is realistic in form but romantic in narration.

It increased a Negro's confidence in him as he had to contend not only with a hostile universe but also a social system in which they were relegated to the level of the primal slave, an animal for ever trying to trick the white master. As such the Tales do not represent a morally tenable world. They exist in a world where morality and logic have not come into play, or may be, are not applicable. The Rabbit survives in a predatory world through his wits and ingenuity. His acts are rationalized by giving some reason for his action. He has been tortured by that particular animal etc. Whatever his motive there is no escape from him as there is no escape from the irrational in human life. Thus Brer Rabbit by extension, is the rationalized irrational, and aesthetically he is irony.

The Rabbit almost always triumphs over the fiercer animals that never seem to learn from their experience. Brer Rabbit's killing other animals is not tragic because they happen to be in a world where the law of survival alone operates. In a primitive world such tragedies are a simple fact of life and being alive depends on chance. Bad luck always moves in the shape of a bigger animal trying to devour the smaller. This is a fact which the Negro has experienced for centuries in the jungles of Africa and then in the South of America. There are certain macabre instances of wanton cruelty by the Rabbit. In the story "The Awful Fate of Mr. Wolfe" (Tales p. 43) the Rabbit shelters the Wolf in a chest to save him from the dogs and locks the chest and then goes about to kill him by scalding him by pouring hot water over him. There is another story where Brer Wolf's blind mother is killed and her head is taken to his family to be boiled and eaten. To the boy's (the boy is the sole listener) objection Uncle Remus says 'Date was enduring erde dog days'. Analysing the ruthless cruelty of the Rabbit, Daunner observes:

We may interpret the 'dog days' as an era when the cruelties of life are most apt to produce an expression of sheer savage, uninhibited nature. There is an earliest time world suggested here. And so perhaps we may say that the levels of experience presented here suggest stages in Man's emergence from the period of savagery and of a brutal savage existence.

The roles of the boy and Uncle Remus become important in this respect. When the boy protests about the wanton violence of the stories, he registers the protest of an individual against brutality and injustice. He is the naive eternal child asking the eternal question WHY' and questioning the amorality of the Rabbit and other animals. The boy is the emerging awareness of right. He matures with the help of Uncle Remus, who is an epitome of the wisdom and reason of a whole race. He accept things as they come without analysing them because he is too familiar with the ever present irrational and the ironical in the tooth and nail existence of the slave as he says "Lots of people suffer for udder fokes sins". This is the way the world is.

If we take a few of Uncle Remus Tales we will find a series of southern norms satirized in them. Certain taboos of southern life are presented topsy-turvy in the tales. The famous Tar Baby story (Tales) satirizes the polite mannerisms of the white. Mr. Wolf decides to teach Brer Rabbit a lesson and designs a doll out of tar and dresses it up and puts it in Brer Rabbit's way. Brer Rabbit is attracted by the female and comes out full of niceties. When he does not get any response he goes and kisses the Tar Baby and is stuck there. The more he tries to extricate himself the more entangled he becomes. Mr. Wolf has a hearty laugh. The Rabbit has to use his quick wit to escape death from Mr. Wolf's clutches who intends to burn and eat him. The story satirizes the polite southern manners which have no depth. They are as sticky and dangerous as the Tar Baby.

The southern life style was very prestige-conscious and the social structure was divided into the rich and the poor, the whites and the blacks. The blacks were always kept at a safe distance. They could never share food with the whites and they had no access to the white women while the whites could avail and victimize the black females. These things registered for centuries on the consciousness of the Negro. Hence, the recurring theme of restoration honour in the Tales. Food sharing is one such theme which involves honour. Sex is another.

Sex forms another issues always at stake in the animal world. Throughout the Rabbit is in aggressive competition with other bigger animals for getting 'Miss Meadow's and the gal's favours'. In the tale "Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Mr. Fox' Mr. Rabbit boasts to the ladies that he is Mr. Fox's boss and through an elaborate trickery persuades Mr. Fox to be saddled and rides him. The Rabbit winning through deceit seems to say when it comes to basics we are all equals and given the opportunity the best man i.e. Mr. Rabbit wins.

Hence again, one is reminded of the fact that the white man's sanction to the Negro is to not dare look at the white woman while all the while the whites have a free access to Negro women. By showing the Rabbit having friendship on free and equal terms with Miss Meadows and the girls, the Tales try to restore the dignity of the Negro. It is also noteworthy that while the sex contest goes on, the prime motive is never instinct gratification but always prestige.

Another recurrent theme in the Tales is resistance to forced labour. There are various Tales in which Brer Rabbit shirks hard work imposed by the Community. He tries to find ways to get the benefit without slaving for it. There is the interesting tale of 'Story about the Little Rabbit (Tales) in which the fox stands for the cruel overseer who forced the slaves to hard labour. The fox wants to eat up the chubby little rabbits and so he puts them to impossible tasks like bringing water in a sieve. The little rabbits are then helped by a bird.

There were two important aspects of food sharing in Southern society which reflected the social differences. One, the activity of eating together which signified social cohesion and from which the Negro was deprived, and second, the element of hunger which compelled the Negro to steal food. We find Mr. Rabbit stealing butter and meat in various stories. In 'Mr. Fox Goes Hunting but Mr. Rabbit Bags the Game' (Tales), Mr. Rabbit lies in Mr. Fox's way and pretends to be dead. Mr. Rabbit repeats the trick thrice and ultimately Mr. Fox is tempted to put down his bag of game to pick all the dead rabbits. As he goes, Mr. Rabbit scampers off with the booty.

Thus the satiric allegory runs throughout the tales satirizing and exposing the white norms; the trickery used by smaller animals to win over the bigger ones signifies victory of brain over brawn. It is through, trick, wit, and tolerance that the smaller ones survive the tough battle for existence. By making the Rabbit always the victor, the Negro fantasizes to be a winner one day.

The Rabbit is easily identifiable with the Negro but Uncle Remus, does not seem to be an oppressed Negro that would identify himself with the jungle existence of the Rabbit. He is shown to be living in the memories of the good old plantation days. He, in fact, inhabits a world wholly of the white man's making, a world in which there were benevolent masters and faithful servants.

In the 19th Century the South was going through a period of transition and doubt. It had a divided conscience. The intellectuals and writers of the day realized the abject inhumanity over which the institution of slavery rested, but they knew, some of them being themselves plantation owners that if slavery was abolished it would topple down a whole age-old feudal system, a culture and a whole life-style. There was a hoard of writers who supported abolition, but at the same time romanticized the plantation era. Their voices were a mixed interplay of guilt psychology, political awareness of the changing times and an urge to say the right thing. Every writer had to find an 'objective correlative to express what he knew to be the truth. The Afro-American animal fables provided that appropriate medium to Harris. In Uncle Remus he presents the point of an old Negro who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery and who has all the prejudices of caste and pride of family that were the natural results of that system.

Robert Bone while analysing, the South's conscience as a "guilty elusive state of mind which seldom appears in its true guise to the conscious mind", points out that in spite of Harris' assertion his unconscious motivations were different. He says the 'subliminal world of the black folk tale' fascinated Harris only because it was the only medium which could convey the truth. Robert Bone also agrees with Bernard Wolfe who analyses the character of Uncle Remus as the archetype of Negro grin giver created by the whites to satisfy their own conscience. Harris, Wolfe says: uses the grin to give a padded blow to the white race. He presents Uncle Remus with a kind smile because that is how the southern reader wished to see the Negro, smiling and always in his place. Harris says the stories depict the roaring comedy of animal life but it is not so....

Thus the guilt of a whole nation is allegorized in the two diverse characters of Uncle Remus and the Rabbit. This brings us to the autobiographical element in the Tales. Harris, a fatherless child, was a literary protégé of Turner of Turnwold plantation who was a brilliant writer and a pioneer newspaperman of the nineteenth century. It was under his guidance that Harris's literary efforts flourished. He inherited Turner's compassion for the Negroes. His childhood memories find an expression in Uncle Remus Tales. He could not be unfaithful to the childhood memories but he had to be true to the present and to the pre and post war realities of the South as well. The right expression of the total truth about the negro came out in the shape of the Remus Tales. While the editor in him advocated reconstruction, the writer in him was sensitively aware of the fading away of higher values of life. He knew the tide of change would and should not stop and he also saw a different future for the Negro emerging. The shy fatherless child in him

had found a father figure in Uncle Remus and if we correlate the comment once he made to his daughter in a letter, that all of us have two entities or personalities, we find this other personality was the negro in him. He lived a white man but he wished to be a Negro.

Harris was born in the formative years of American literature when various new trends in literature, which were to become modern American literature later on, were taking shape side by side. He represented the local colour and plantation school and was a pioneer in Afro-American literature. These three trends at times intermixed to produce a hybrid style, Harris's writings, especially the Tales are romantic, at the same time, the local colour trend of presenting the dialect, manners and customs of the South represents a realistic approach in literature, and the Rabbit placed side by side with uncle Remus represents these two schools and stresses the two divergent currents flowing side by side in the South. This assimilation may look discordant to the modern reader but it was not so to the 19th century reader. Harris gave them what they were most willing to accept. Harris as an individual unburdens his mixed heritage in the shape of these two characters that have fascinated readers for ages.

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