

## **The Trickster in African American Literature**

Trudier Harris

J. Carlyle Sitterson Professor of English, Emerita

University of North Carolina

National Humanities Center Fellow

©National Humanities Center

Almost every oral tradition in the world has trickster figures, and African American culture is no exception. Tricksters dominate the folk tradition that peoples of African descent developed in the United States, especially those tales Trickster figures, present in every oral tradition, are weak, often amoral, characters who outsmart stronger opponents. that were influenced by African folk tradition, landscape, and wildlife. By definition, tricksters are animals or characters who, while ostensibly disadvantaged and weak in a contest of wills, power, and/or resources, succeed in getting the best of their larger, more powerful adversaries. Tricksters achieve their objectives through indirection and mask-wearing, through playing upon the gullibility of their opponents. In other words, tricksters succeed by outsmarting or outthinking their opponents. In executing their actions, they give no thought to right or wrong; indeed, they are amoral. Mostly, they are pictured in contest or quest situations, and they must use their wits to get out of trouble or bring about a particular result. For example, in one African American folktale, Brer Rabbit, the quintessential trickster figure in African American folklore, succeeds in getting Brer Fox to rescue him from a well by asserting that the moon reflected in the water at the bottom of the well is really a block of cheese. Brer Fox jumps into the other water bucket, descends into the well, and, in the process, enables Brer Rabbit to rise to freedom.

While frequently humorous, trickster tales often convey serious social critiques. Though trickster tales in African American culture are frequently a source of humor, they also contain serious commentary on the inequities of existence in a country where the promises of democracy were denied to a large portion of the citizenry, a pattern that becomes even clearer in the literary adaptations of trickster figures. As black people who were enslaved gained literacy and began to write about their experiences, they incorporated figures from oral tradition into their written creations. In fact, some scholars have argued that the African American oral tradition is the basis for all written literary production by African Americans. To get a sense of this influence and these interconnections, it is necessary to explore the African American oral tradition.

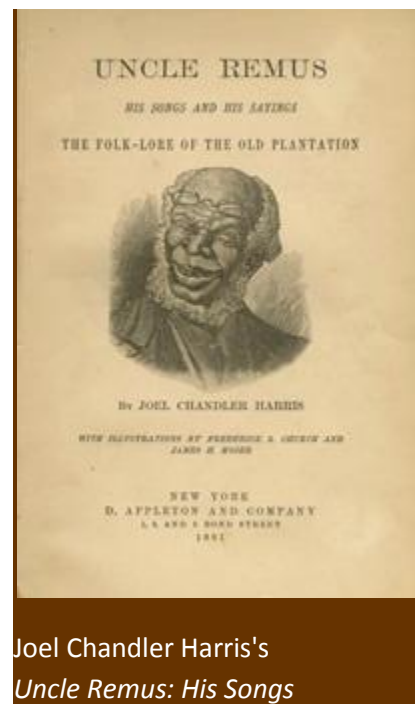
During slavery, trickster tales with human characters reflected the actual behavior of the people telling and hearing them. People of African descent who found themselves enslaved in the New World, and specifically on United States soil, were not brought to the West to create poems, plays, short stories, essays, and novels. They were brought for the bodies, their physical labor. Denied access to literacy by law and custom, anything they wanted to retain in the way of cultural creation had to be passed down by word of mouth, or, in terms of crafts, by demonstration and imitation. After long hours of work in cotton and tobacco fields, therefore, blacks would occasionally gather in the evenings for storytelling. Tales they shared during slavery were initially believed to focus almost exclusively on animals. However, as more and more researchers became interested in African American culture after slavery and in the

early twentieth century, they discovered a strand of tales that focused on human actors. It is generally believed that enslaved persons did not share with prying researchers the tales containing human characters because the protagonists were primarily tricksters, and the tales showcased actions that allowed those tricksters to get the best of their so-called masters. In some of these instances, as Lawrence W. Levine notes, perhaps the actions of the characters did indeed reflect the actions of those enslaved.

The records left by nineteenth-century observers of slavery and by the masters themselves indicate that a significant number of slaves lied, cheated, stole, feigned illness, loafed, pretended to misunderstand the orders they were given, put rocks in the bottom of their cotton baskets in order to meet their quota, broke their tools, burned their masters' property, mutilated themselves in order to escape work, took indifferent care of the crops they were cultivating, and mistreated the livestock placed in their care to the extent that masters often felt it necessary to use the less efficient mules rather than horses since the former could better withstand the brutal treatment of the slaves.<sup>1</sup>

Levine makes clear that there was a short distance between trickster tactics in life and those that constituted the tales black folks created.

Brer Rabbit as the primary African American trickster may have been an adaptation of the African cunning rabbit, a small deer, and/or of Anansi, the well-known African spider trickster. Animals that appear in Trickster tales themselves are tricky; their seriousness is hidden and often overlooked. Frequently in the tales about Brer Rabbit, such as elephants and lions, are also believed to be African transplants, since these animals are not native to the United States. From these adaptations,

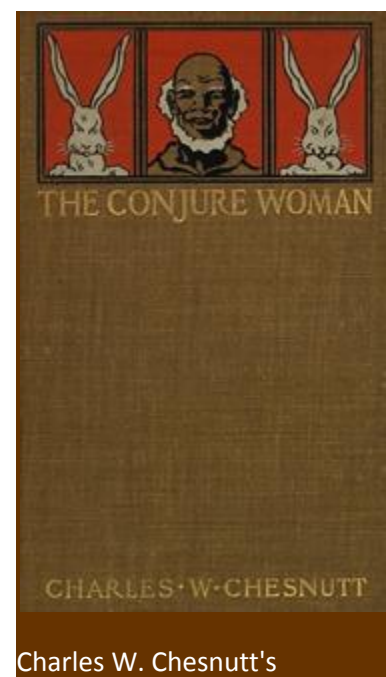


enslaved African Americans created worlds in which animal actions mirrored human actions during and after slavery. Their kinship to fables thus enabled the seriousness of the tales to be overlooked at times. That is one way to explain the popularity of [Joel Chandler](#)

*and His Sayings.*

[Harris's](#) Uncle Remus stories, which were first published in 1881. The violence and comeuppance that characterize these tales, frequently with larger animals (whites) being bested by the smaller Brer Rabbit (blacks), were passed over as readers focused more on the fanciful portrayals of imaginary animal worlds. It was not until the 1880s and the founding of the American Folklore Society that collectors observed a strand of tales that did not disguise the actions between blacks and whites. They uncovered the "John and Old Master" cycle of tales. In these renderings, John, as representative of enslaved blacks, manages to get the best of Old Master in almost every situation in which they are pitted against each other. Contest dominates their interactions in a world where the weak and the witty always triumph over the powerful and the presumed intellectually superior.

The patterns that were set in the oral tradition found their way early into African American literary creations. As early as the 1880s, North Carolina born [Charles Waddell Chesnutt](#) realized that he could achieve much as a writer if he imitated the pattern that Charles Chesnutt's trickster tales do cultural and political work. Harris had set in his Uncle Remus stories. In a series of stories that he finally collected as *The Conjure Woman* (1899), Chesnutt created Uncle Julius, a raconteur left over from days of slavery, who entertains his white employers with tales of enslavement. These sometimes extranatural tales feature animals and humans who manage frequently to execute trickster tactics and improve their lot. For example, in one tale Julius recounts how an enslaved man is spared being sent from one plantation to another by having his wife, who is a conjure woman, turn him into a tree. The trickery works until a



local sawmill selects that particular tree to cut. As this tale makes clear, Chesnutt adapts and explodes trickster conventions. The ruses of trickery in the various tales might work for awhile, but they serve more importantly to convey the horrors of enslavement, which is where the second level of trickery occurred in *The Conjure Woman*.

### *The Conjure Woman.*

By allowing Uncle Julius to relate heart-wrenching tales of enslavement to a white couple recently located from the North to the South, Chesnutt is able to offer subtle commentary on the harshness of slavery and suggest the need for current-day democratic fairness even as he entertains his audience with the Aesop's fable quality of the tales. Julius succeeds in convincing Annie, the wife, of the horrors of slavery even if her husband, John, remains skeptically detached from the emotional truths that underlie the magical workings of the stories. In Chesnutt's hands, therefore, the trickster figure is one who does political and cultural work. Chesnutt's hope is that his reading audience will respond to the tales in the way that Annie does—by recognizing that blacks were denied basic human rights and that those rights should certainly be restored in the early twentieth century, the time at which Chesnutt's reading audience is encountering the tales.

Contemporary with Chesnutt, poet [Paul Laurence Dunbar](#) also incorporated trickster ideas and figures into his works. In "[An Ante-Bellum Sermon](#)," During slavery times and for decades thereafter trickster tales, with their subtlety and indirection, were necessary because blacks could not risk a direct attack on white society. for example, he allows a preacher who is delivering a sermon to enslaved persons only through the largesse of the master to adopt the mask-wearing role common to tricksters and deliver a dual message to those enslaved. His audience might rightly interpret his calls for freedom to have present-day relevance—even as he vigorously claims that he is speaking of freedom "in a Bibleistic way." Overlaying his serious comment with humor, Dunbar makes clear his concern for the plight of black people. In other poems, however, such as "[Accountability](#)," the dominant strand of humorous trickery is more apparent. Both Dunbar and Chesnutt were writing at a time when strictures on black creativity were prominent. Neither dared to indict whites directly for the conditions under which blacks suffered in slavery, during Reconstruction, or in the late nineteenth century. They could, however, imply such responsibility through the development of trickster paradigms.

The trickster in the twentieth centuryIn terms of twentieth century adaptation of trickster figures in African American literary creation, perhaps [Ralph Ellison](#) represents the epitome of the practice. In *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison illustrates characteristics of the trickster in the narrator's grandfather, who asserts that, in relation to dealing with whites, one should "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open."<sup>2</sup> The implied militancy shocks the narrator and his family, who have all believed that the grandfather was an acquiescing Uncle Tom. It is much later, when the narrator arrives in New York and is used by the Brotherhood, that he begins to understand trickster mentality as a strategy for survival with dignity (what the grandfather employed) as well as a strategy for political intervention (what he attempts when he "grins" and asserts to the leadership of the Brotherhood that all is well in Harlem. In reality, the community is about to explode.).

In other literary works, trickster strategies border on the con artist tradition when blacks use them against members of their own community. That is essentially what the invisible Willie Harris does to the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) when he absconds with the remainder of the ten thousand dollars that they have been awarded from the dead Younger patriarch's insurance policy. Other works that include such trickery applied against other black people include [John Oliver Killens's](#) *The Cotillion or One Good Bull is Half the Herd* (1971), which is his take on the pretentiousness of debutante balls in black communities, and [Langston Hughes's](#) "Who's Passing for Who?," in which black couples try to determine which one is passing for white. This pattern also includes Ellison's Rinehart, a trickster of many disguises, including preacher and pimp. By contrast, delightfully humorous cross racial executions of trickster tactics in the literature include [William Melvin Kelley's](#) *dem* (1969), a reference to white people and a novel in which the white male protagonist is duped by the black man who has co-fathered a set of twins with him (one twin is black and the other white). Another example is Ted Shine's short play *Contribution* (1969), about a grandmother who shuffles, grins, and, in her role as maid, serves poisoned cornbread to her white Southern employers. Several of [Sterling Brown's](#) poems, especially those involving [Slim Greer](#), also incorporate trickster figures, and these characters appear in a host of other works by African American writers.

The trickster in the twenty-first century Although the circumstances that made the trickster an obvious model for action during the nineteenth century no longer exist, the appeal of the character remains attractive to African American writers in the twenty-first century. As recently as 2005, [Toni Morrison](#) adapted the figure for inclusion in her novel *Love*. Adaptation is the appropriate word here, because the trickster turns out to be the narrator of the novel. A tale of too many women loving the same rich and chauvinistic man, who neglects all of them for an elusive true love, two of the women fight to determine which is Bill Cosey's true heir. This much-revered Bill Cosey is finally revealed to be so wrong-headed in his relationships that "L," the text's narrator, brings about his demise. She does so quietly, effectively, in an effort to prevent Cosey from leaving his fortune to the elusive Celestial.

"L" shares with Brer Rabbit a desire to level the playing field in the circumstances surrounding her. She also shares his amorality and becomes godlike in her assumption of the right to mete out life and death. And certainly there is a selfishness to what "L," has done, for the beneficiaries of her largesse are unaware of what she has brought about on their behalf. Her actions also include the unusual dimension of working to achieve an objective more for the benefit of others than for the self. This trait thus makes Morrison's transformed representation of the trickster paradigm intriguing enough to begin discussion about the extent to which any true trickster pattern holds in twenty-first century African American literature.

### Guiding Student Discussion

Tricksters engage in trickery to overcome social inequality. Con artists use trickery to defraud. A starting point might be to get students to understand the difference between conning and con artists versus

tricksters and trickery. Con artists can obviously con others who are their intellectual and social equals or perhaps even their superiors. Consider the scam that Paul Newman and Robert Redford execute in the movie *The Sting*. Certainly someone gets taken, but that taking is not couched in racial terms or in terms of social inequality. Tricksters, on the other hand, often attempt to level the playing field, to reduce the inequity in social and power situations. Persons of lesser social status, such as African Americans during slavery and immediately following, could work indirectly to bring about whatever measure of equality they could manage. A favored enslaved person might, for example, stroke the master's ego with a compliment in order to get an additional ration of meat or shot of whiskey.

Tricksters are self-consciously aware of their manipulation. They recognize the distance between them and their victims. It is also necessary to delineate between mask-wearing and uncle tomming in connection with tricksters and trickery. True tricksters manipulate the mask, as the Invisible Man's grandfather did. They are in control of that manipulation, and they never forget that their motives and objectives are antithetical to those of the persons against whom their trickery is directed. Uncle Toms, however, do not separate themselves from the mask or from the society of which they are a part. Their objectives are commensurate with those of the prevailing society or power structure within which they exist. During slavery, an Uncle Tom might have offered *heartfelt* praise to his master, reported to his master on the transgressions of blacks around him, and believed that slavery was generally the correct place on the scale of being for blacks to exist. It is therefore an insult to call someone an Uncle Tom, whereas the tactics of tricksters have historically been applauded. In each case, you might ask your students to consider what the trickster or the Uncle Tom gains through his actions. To whose benefit do those gains accrue? What are the consequences of the gains? What moral issues arise as a result of the trickery?

An early short story that your students will certainly enjoy is Charles Waddell Chesnutt's "[The Passing of Grandison](#)" (1899) (In [The Wife of His Youth and other Stories of the Color Line](#)). In it, a faithful retainer during slavery earns the trust of his master sufficiently to enable him to escape from slavery and to return later and carry several members of his family away with him. By playing to what his master expects of those enslaved and living out those expectations precisely, Grandison is able to carry out a scheme that costs his master thousands upon thousands of dollars. Have your students examine the story carefully to determine what patterns of interaction during slavery have enabled Grandison to succeed at what he attempts. How does he live up to his master's expectations? What enables him to lay the groundwork to achieve his escape and those of his family members? How is the master complicit in Grandison's escape? What, in other words, are the master's shortcomings in his perceptions of what enslaved persons will and will not do? What prevailing notions about slavery may have influenced the master's attitudes? What, ultimately, does Chesnutt hope to achieve in the late nineteenth century with this tale of escape from slavery in the early nineteenth century? Why is a trickster strategy more effective in his achieving his purpose?

A more contemporary short story employing trickster tactics is [Alice Walker's](#) "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," which appeared in *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973). There are two levels of trickster activity in this story about a black woman's revenge against a white woman. The first appears in the frame story, the one in which Tante Rosie, a conjure woman, tricks people in her

community into thinking she has extranatural powers by simply keeping files on all of them. The second occurs in the inner story, about Hannah Kemhuff and how, as a result of white Sarah Holley denying Hannah's family food during the Great Depression, Hannah's husband leaves her, her children die of starvation, and she is reduced to a life of prostitution. Tante Rosie "casts a spell" on Sarah Holley on behalf of Hannah Kemhuff, and the woman dies. The story provides wonderful opportunities to explore the amorality inherent in trickster tactics, for, though Mrs. Kemhuff professes to be a devout Christian, she "prays" fervently for the demise of Sarah Holley (Walker even incorporates the curse prayer directly from [Zora Neale Hurston's](#) *Mules and Men*, a 1935 collection of folklore and conjuration).

Pairing Chesnutt and Walker will allow students to engage in discussion along several lines. They might begin by considering how the two stories show changes in literary representations of trickster figures from the late nineteenth century to the last quarter of the twentieth century. What are the differences in portrayal? How do Chesnutt's objectives align with Walker's objectives? Indeed, are Walker's objectives in the story entirely clear? Who benefits from the trickster's activity in each story? Is one beneficiary more valuable than the other? What about the tone of the stories? Chesnutt deals with the very serious subject of slavery in what could be considered a lighthearted way, while Walker is simultaneously playful and somber. What roles do trickster strategies play in achieving these tones? Do you come away from Walker's story with as complete a sense of conclusion of the issues as you do with Chesnutt's story? Why, finally, is it appropriate to place "casts a spell" in quotation marks in discussing Walker's story and what happens to Sarah Holley?

### Scholars Debate

One possible controversy surrounding the trickster is obviously the clash between amorality and the presumed morality practiced by people who ostensibly embraced Christianity, as the majority of African Americans did. How could black people adhere to subversive tactics and not create a morality that was counter to the one in which they professed belief? John W. Roberts, in *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (1989), does an excellent job of treating this question in relation to Christian blacks who, during slavery, offered wholehearted support to warrior models such as Joshua and, after slavery, offered equally wholehearted support to trickster models such as [Railroad Bill](#). Morris Slater, aka Railroad Bill, reputedly killed a white policeman in Alabama in self-defense in 1893. He then escaped, stole from the railroads, and passed the stolen goods on to needy African Americans who lived along the railroad tracks. African Americans celebrated his trickster exploits and considered him a heroic figure. As Roberts points out at the beginning of his text, "We often use the term 'hero' as if it denoted a universally recognized character type, and the concept of 'heroism' as if it referred to a generally accepted behavioral category. In reality, figures (both real and mythic) and actions dubbed heroic in one context or by one group of people may be viewed as ordinary or even criminal in another context or by other groups, or even by the same ones at different times."<sup>3</sup> The complexity of responses to real or presumed heroic actions, therefore, makes clear the flexibility in morality that governs such responses.



Listeners to and believers in such figures and tales allow a space for approval of the actions of characters within the tales without countering their own ontological beliefs.

In a different context, the notion of heroism in trickster tactics is what engages Roger D. Abrahams in his explorations of the toasts (long narrative poems) and stories that black men in Philadelphia used to entertain themselves in the 1960s. Many of the narratives in *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (1970) focus on less than savory characters getting the best of their adversaries through playing the role of the trickster. These include such selections as "[The Signifying Monkey](#)" as well as some versions of "Staggolee." Toasts that focus on pimps and prostitutes also rely occasionally on trickster tactics. Students might consider, therefore, what happens to a character or a literary form that can be both positive *and* negative and what results obtain in either case. Again, the purposes to which the tactics are put are crucial. Also, how can entertainment (laughter) as an outcome guide the use of trickster dynamics?

As scholars have interpreted trickster figures in tales that were circulated during slavery, some have questioned the approach that posits trickster actions having meaning in the real historical world. Were black raconteurs during slavery really trying to reflect the actions of black and whites, or were they simply creating entertaining narratives? Bernard W. Wolfe is one scholar who believes firmly that the actions of animals in African American trickster tales are intended to represent the actions of human beings. In "Uncle Remus & the Malevolent Rabbit," Wolfe identifies quests for food, interracial sex, and cross-racial social relationship as the primary objectives in the majority of tricksters tales.<sup>4</sup> Since these were some of the key things that whites denied to blacks during and after slavery, Wolfe argues that the folktales are a way for blacks to turn the world upside down. If Brer Rabbit is shut out of the larder and smokehouse during slavery, then he will take what he needs to be hale and hearty. Wolfe comments: "The world, in Brer Rabbit's wary eyes, is a jungle. Life is a battle-unto-the-death for food, sex, power, prestige, a battle without rules. There is only one reality in this life: who is on top?" (530). Similarly, while black males could not compete for the hands of white women, Brer Rabbit is able to trick his competition (ostensibly the white man) into allowing him to use him as a riding horse as he comes up to a porch to court Miss Sophronie. Wolfe reads the Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit escapades as a quest for what he calls a "communal meal," a symbol that all is well socially between the races in the South. Since such harmony is obviously not the case, then the trickster tactics and violent domination will continue in the guise of fanciful entertainment.

Other commentators on tricksters in folklore as well as tricksters in African American literature include Alan Dundes, ed., *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (1973), Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1977), and Daryl Cumber Dance, *Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans* (1978) as well as her *From My People: 400 Years of African American Folklore* (2002). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. provides an extensive exploration of the trickster's influence on African American literature in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988); he offers particularly expansive commentary on the works of Zora Neale Hurston.



## Endnotes

[1Lawrence W. Levine](#), *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford, 1977), 122. Levine draws his information from a variety of sources that he cites in the text. In *Kindred*, Dana tries to use her intelligence to get Rufus to change his slaveholding ways.

[2 Ralph Ellison](#), *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1952), 16.

[3John W. Roberts](#), *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom*(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 1.

[4Bernard Wolfe](#), "Uncle Remus & the Malevolent Rabbit" in Alan Dundes, ed., *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 524-540.