

## **Framming A Trickster Character in Two Different Media and Eras: A Study on Br'er Rabbit in *Uncle Remus' Stories* and Disney's *Song of the South***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article analyses Br'er Rabbit, a trickster character in African-American folklore. As a trickster Br'er Rabbit possesses a paradoxical nature. On the one hand, Br'er Rabbit acts as a hero but on the other hand, he constantly plays tricks on others and by doing so, he is also violating the prevailing values. These two opposing aspects of trickster's nature offer an interesting subject for the research. The questions considered worth focusing on in discussing the subject are: How can trickster character be described? What values are represented by trickster character? Is there any shift in the description and represented values in different media and over time?

The study presented in this article was aimed at investigating the transformation of how the trickster is characterized and values represented by trickster Br'er Rabbit in Uncle Remus' folktale version of "The Wonderful Tar Baby (1881) and The Laughing Place" (1903) written by Joel Chandler Harries and the same trickster character in the same stories featured in Disney's "Song of the South" (1946). By comparing and contrasting both narratives in different media and eras, it is uncovered that there are some changes on the depiction and nature as well as values represented by Br'er Rabbit, the trickster character.

**Keywords:** *trickster, Br'er Rabbit, transformation of characterization and values represented*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study proposes a formulation of characteristics and values represented by Br'er Rabbit, the quintessential trickster figure of African American folklore. The significance of the study is related to the fact that Br'er Rabbit is looked upon as a folk hero among African American society. Intrigued by Ryan's statement "...the trickster is a fascinating, multifaceted, multidimensional character" (2008: 305), this study attempts to offer a critical perspective on this matters. In some African American narrative events, Br'er Rabbit appears with his

heroic demeanors, but in some other narrative events, this character reveals his deceitful and despicable side, making him look like a villain.

Public reception and perception on a cultural product change over time. A product of creative culture could even be responded with different kinds of appreciation from different groups of society within the same period. Such diversity in receptions and perceptions was where Disney movie *Song of the South* (1946) featuring stories of Br'er Rabbit was situated. Following its premiere release in 1946, this movie became a blockbuster hit and made a profit of \$65 million

(Thomas, 1994: 161). This economic success indicates that during the release of the movie, American public welcomed it and showed good appreciation for it. Its appeal was largely built up by captivating storyline and sophisticated animation techniques.

However, aside from its popular appeals, *Song of the South* had attracted scrutinizing attentions and severe criticisms for its allegedly racist implications. This controversy surrounding the movie has become my reason for choosing the movie version Br'er Rabbit as the material object of this study. The analysis of the issue is guided by the question: is there any transformation of characterization and value represented by Br'er Rabbit that has made the movie responded by both positive appreciations and negative criticisms highlighting a perspective that the movie has a racist undertone? In addressing this question, I incorporated a written folktale collection of Br'er Rabbit written by Joel Chandler Harris, particularly the stories of *Wonderful Tar Baby* (1881) and *The Laughing Place* (1903) into the analysis to put its movie version counterpart into perspective. In the discussion, this article compares and contrasts how Br'er Rabbit is characterized and what values represented by the trickster in *Uncle Remus' Stories* version and Disney's *Song of the South*. By studying the narratives in two different media published in different eras, the answer to the critical inquiry why there was such contradictory responses toward the work will be answered.

### PHYSICAL TRANSFORMATION AND ITS SIGNIFICATION

Br'er Rabbit narrative texts presenting *Tar Baby* story and *The Laughing Place* story in which Uncle Remus acts as the story teller contain similar narrative structures and plots with the storyline presented in Disney's *Song of the South*. Uncle Remus is characterized as a former slave who likes to tell trickster stories to the children in his neighborhood. In its earliest publication, Chandler's collection of Uncle Remus' stories was widely praised for its astute and communicative representation of African American vernacular. A comparable praise was given to the *Song of the South* version of the stories by Arman Gagnon

(1999), "No movie, to my cinématique knowledge, has blended so beautifully and realistically animation and live action as has *Song of the South*." However, suspected by a number of critics for containing racist inferences, the movie's distribution in the US was banned since 1986. This banning action deserves critical attention. It needs to be examined what factors contributing to the banning and which parts of the narrative perceived of as supporting racism and unsuitable for public consumption.

In stories of *Tar Baby* and *Laughing Place*, the characteristics of Br'er Rabbit as a trickster are represented similarly in both versions of narrative media. A significant differences become evident when Br'er Rabbit physical characteristics and his mental characteristics as reflected through the former are closely observed. This trickster's physical representation has undergone substantial changes spanning from 1881 when the folktale version of Uncle Remus' stories was rising into popularity to 1946 when the stories' film version was produced. The illustrations of Br'er Rabbit are collected from internet sources guided by the key words; the title of the narrative and its year of publication. The source of Harris' Br'er Rabbit stories were the African-American folktales that he intended to document them (Harris 1881, 1903). This character was then transformed from the verbal description of his physical characteristics in the narrative texts into a pictorial representation. In the earliest illustration found, Br'er Rabbit was drawn in a simple black-and-white sketch outlining a figure of an adult rabbit dressed like a human. The image of adulthood of the trickster is observable in the formal wear he is pictured in, his postures in various illustrations, and the accompanying facial expressions.

The visualization of Br'er Rabbit as shown in Picture 1 implies the way some Americans construct the characteristics of this trickster figure in perceptible object of imagery based on their verbal depiction in the written tales of Br'er Rabbit. In the previous study about this trickster by Dunn, the stories of Br'er Rabbit are perceived as "a projection of the slave's personal experiences, dreams, and hopes" (1979: 103). Referring to this view, it is explicable that the visual depiction of Br'er Rabbit is constructed in accordance with

the characteristics of slaves it means to represent. The specified illustration of Br'er Rabbit shows the trickster standing on his two feet, having dark fur, wearing garbs that slaves used to put on certain occasions, and bearing serious look on his face. The serious marking on his face might be perceived as a consequence of his harsh realities with sufferings and cruel oppression on him.

**Picture 1**

**Br'er Rabbit illustration in Uncle Remus' stories<sup>1</sup>**



**Picture 2**

**Br'er Rabbit illustration in Disney's *Song of The South*<sup>2</sup>**



In *Song of the South* dated, Br'er Rabbit is transformed into an animated figure. With children as the targeted audience, the overall appearance of Br'er Rabbit presents an image of a funny and

adorable character. This cartoon character has broad soles of feet, relaxed facial expression, and younger look. He wears polo shirt and shorts that makes him look casual, relaxed and cheerful. His pink shirt suggests an association with girls while his blue shorts can be related to boys. The colors suggest that this version of Br'er Rabbit is created for female and male audiences. The choice of color can also be considered as an effective and efficient marketing strategy. Pink and blue are brought into play to expand the target market.

This animated trickster figure is quite dark, but his dark skin or fur tends to appear brown or grey. This color suggests an interracial interest. He is neither white nor black, but somewhere in between. If this choice of color is appreciated as a symbol of an idea or a concept, it can be inferred that this version of Br'er Rabbit is intended to embrace not only African American society but also all other racial groups existing in USA. All colors associated with racial features are attempted to be represented through the image of this character. Thus, Disney's Br'er Rabbit is not only for African American audiences but also audiences of other racial groups. Moreover, his outfit gives a more universal image instead of showing a preference for a particular group of society.

Furthermore, Br'er Rabbit's postures or gestures in *Song of the South* present different images compared to those illustrated in Uncle Remus folktale version. Br'er Rabbit in the later has his arms crossed behind his back and his legs are slightly apart. He also has serious look on his face as if he is making an observation on his surroundings and reflecting on what action take or decision to make. He also looks as if he is waiting for an instruction or a direction about what to do next. In the film, the movements of Br'er Rabbit's hands give an impression that he takes everything he is hearing offhandedly. His moves suggest that he doesn't think take everything seriously. He stays unperturbed. It won't be surprising that to many of his audiences or observers, this trickster is fun and engaging.

### **BR'ER RABBIT AS A REPRESENTATION OF THE PREVAILING VALUES**

As quoted by Leslie (1998) Abraham stated that for centuries Br'er Rabbit have been communicating

the values that reflect African indigenous culture as their root and experiences of African American people throughout their enslavement in America (1975: 55-80). These historical and cultural backgrounds have made this trickster appreciated as folk hero for African Americans in its early appearance and for general American people in present-day era.

The combination of Br'er Rabbit's characterization as folk hero and his trickster characteristic has contributed to his dual nature. Accordingly, the opposing sides of his nature presumably represent two opposing poles of values. The first pole showcases his adroitness in defeating physically much stronger opponents. This side of Br'er Rabbit provides a model of actions for slaves in dealing with various adversities in life. He stands for hopes for the slaves that someday they would be released from slavery and free from the oppression and domination of slave owners and other white Americans. This is the positive value represented by Br'er Rabbit. His triumphs over bigger opponents give an inspiration that no matter how hard the situation has become, if one can take every available opportunity to do his/her best in using his/her mind, he/she will find an ingenious way out.

On the contrary, the other side of this trickster is his willingness to do anything to achieve his goal. This attitude makes Br'er Rabbit appear as a character that signifies the absence of moral values or amorality. Br'er Rabbit's amorality makes this trickster a negative model and therefore not to be emulated. Br'er Rabbit defeats his stronger opponents using his skill in trickery such as lying, making imposture, being a two-faced swindler, deceiving, and taking advantage on others. For the slaves in antebellum era, such strategy of resistance is not something new to do to stay away from trouble and avoid punishment.

In two illustrations of Br'er Rabbit in Picture 3 and Picture 4, there is a conspicuous contrast between the two version of narratives in the way Br'er Rabbit reacts to Tar Baby. In Uncle Remus folktale version, Br'er Rabbit behaves nicely and greets Tar Baby who is sitting on a roadside when he passes by. The trickster's gesture shows that he is being polite and wondering what Tar Baby is doing there. There is no picture that illustrates Br'er Rabbit hitting Tar Baby and getting himself stuck to the tar figure. In contrast, in *Song of the South*, there is a scene when Br'er Rabbit looks irritated, loses his temper and gets ready to hit Tar Baby. Not only that he makes a threatening swing with his arms, flexing his muscle, he also lift up his

**Picture 3**  
Tar Baby in Uncle Remus' stories<sup>3</sup>



**Picture 4**  
Tar Baby in *Song of the South*<sup>4</sup>



leg. It is obvious that he is about to give Tar Baby a blow with all his might. His temper is clearly seen from the look on his face and from the way he abandons his bag.

As can be seen in Picture 4, Br'er Rabbit looks more belligerent than the one illustrated in the Uncle Remus folktale version. Putting the later image of Br'er Rabbit into its historical context, this version of illustration portrays the condition of American society when *Song of the South* was released. Although slavery had long been abolished, African American people still had to endure injustice and discrimination and for this reason they are encouraged to take action and/or express themselves more boldly.

On the contrary, the illustration of the trickster in Uncle Remus folktale version seems to advocate prudence, composure or self-control, and vigilance. The image is to model that if one neglects those attitudes, he/she is going to suffer an unfortunate happening like what has happened to Br'er Rabbit. The three values were increasingly necessary for the slaves to adopt during antebellum periods and for African Americans in post-antebellum periods until today since unfair or discriminative treatments against them can still be found nowadays. Given the unfavorable realities, they need to increase their watchful observation on their surroundings, be cautious in making a new acquaintance, and be patient or have self-control in coping with all experiences they have to go through in their lives.

The similar values are also represented by Br'er Rabbit in the cinematic presentation of Tar Baby in *Song of the South*. What makes the difference is the ending of the story. The main value that the ending tries to communicate is freedom. The Tar Baby story in the film shows that in a critical situation, Br'er Rabbit manages to trick Br'er Bear into freeing him from his misfortune and then throwing him into the Briar Patch. Br'er Rabbit is capable of manipulating Br'er Bear's mind despite the fact that the bear is bigger and stronger than him. Being cleverer than his opponent, the trickster is successful in taking advantage of Br'er Bear's stupidity. As narrated in the film, Br'er Rabbit outsmarts his opponent by saying that he is in a bad situation at that moment but he can get into an even worse situation if

he falls into Briar Patch. Enticed to make Br'er Rabbit suffer more, Br'er Bear unsticks him from the Tar Baby and then throws him into the Briar Patch which is exactly what Br'er Rabbit wants Br'er Bear to do for him.

The story of tar Baby that is communicated in the way the movie narrates it can be viewed as a symbol of freedom for the oppressed individuals. If put into the context of African American people's realities during slavery, the Br'er Rabbit's release from misfortune can be appreciated as an expression of the highest hope of the slaves of being liberated from oppression. If the performance of the story is put in the context of the current era, it can be considered representing the value of freedom for African Americans to pursue better life. Gaining freedom from injustice as a perpetuation of racism continues is the struggle they still have to undertake until today. Up to this point, it is evident that the message of the story is still relevant to the current condition of American society in general. The next question to address is whether the story of *The Laughing Place* represents the same value as *Tar Baby* does.

**Picture 5**  
*The Laughing Place in stories*<sup>5</sup>



**Picture 6**  
*The Laughing Place in Uncle Remus' Song of the South*<sup>6</sup>



The two illustrations in Picture 5 and Picture 6 above represent the same story in two different media of narration. The differences between the two illustration point to different focuses regarding the values the narrators wants to communicate to the readers or the audiences. In Uncle Remus folktale version, there is this character named Br'er Fox illustrated as a more dominant animal compared to Br'er Rabbit for he is bigger in size and carrying a kind of weapon in his hand. In spite of his intimidating appearance, he is pictured in "friendlier" image than his animated version in *Song of the South*. The narration of *The Laughing Place* in the folktale version presents Br'er Rabbit who seems willingly follow his opponent to *The Laughing Place* as what he is told to do. The part of illustration that shows him carrying a basket and a cane suggests this compliant gesture on Br'er Rabbit's side. Connected to a tradition in the era of slavery, the illustrated segment of the story can be perceived reflecting the condition when slave owners exerted their power and control over their slaves not by building huge walls around their properties but by making them depending on them. Their dependence was conditioned through the daily supplies of food and water, clothes, and shelters although they were very low in quality.

In *Song of the South*, Br'er Rabbit's portrayal shows him in a very unfortunate situation. He is tightly tied up and although there is still some distance between him and the ones who has tied him, it is Br'er Fox who has the control of the rope

that holds him in captive. In this version, Br'er Fox is not alone. He is accompanied by Br'er Bear which is also an opponent of Br'er Rabbit.

Despite his very difficult situation where he is confronted by two opponents, Br'er Rabbit can still outsmart them with his skillful deception and break free from his confinement. When he realizes that Br'er Fox is not interested in his story about Laughing Place, he quickly changes his target of manipulation; Br'er Bear. The story seems to communicate a lesson that we should know or recognize which one is friend and which one is foe. The distinctive characteristics of one from the other entail the difference in the way we treat and deal with them. In fact, this is the basic strategy anyone needs to accustom to in their social interactions. Br'er Rabbit's way of manipulating Br'er Bear has proven effective in dividing his opponents' power over him. His strategy is: if he cannot outsmart both of them together, then he plays his trick on one of them first and beat him with it. Once the first target falls into his trickery, it would be easier for him to defeat the other.

Although the trickster is pictured in more unfortunate situation in terms of being outnumbered and bound by his opponents in *Song of the South*, it is interesting to see that the scene representing this situation doesn't look presenting a 'violence.' The comical and light-hearted cinematic illustrations of the characters have not made a sense of aggressive confrontation possible. On top of that, his confinement doesn't stop the trickster from jumping around and laughing cheerfully when he suddenly has a clever idea to set him free from his opponents' captivity.

This observation leads to another interesting object of examination, which is the *laughing place* itself. What does Br'er Rabbit specifically mean by *the laughing place*? Why does Br'er Bear want the same thing? When this laughing place is examined as a sign or a symbol, it can be considered offering a positive idea about dealing with adversity. Throughout our life, we cannot avoid encountering hardships, disheartening challenges, distressing situations, and helplessness. However, it is important for us to prevent ourselves from being trapped in despair, and it is in this point that *laughing place* comes into play. Each individual needs "a laughing place" which functions as a

sanctuary where he/she can relieve him/herself from distress, give him/herself a chance to once again enjoying life, and find happiness. The laughing place takes many forms. It might be one's house or one's room or the beach or any other specific places. It can also be founded in enjoyable activities such as reading, gardening or other kinds of hobby. One's laughing place would be a portal to recharge; to gain back his/her enthusiasm and passion.

Based on the discussions on both versions of Br'er Rabbit stories so far, it can be said that in both representations of the trickster, there is no portrayal of violation or denial of the role of a trickster character as folk hero that African American values in particular and American society in general have recognized. The next challenging question would be: Why did some Americans respond *Song of the South* negatively? List of sources can be found regarding the matter and all of them focused on the live action part which dominated the film, about two third of it, rather than on the cartoon part which tells about Br'er Rabbit. One of disapproving argument was put forward by Walter White, the secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People (NAACP). He asserts in his letter that "NAACP was shocked by the award of January *Parents* magazine medal to *Song of the South* which glorifies racial stereotypes and virtually justifies slavery by picturing it as an idyllic system" (1947). This strong disagreement is definitely talking about the portrayal of the slaves in the movie played by live actors.

Cohen in his book *Forbidden Animation: Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted Animations in America* captured the dialogues among protesters who considered the portrayal of a group of African-Americans singing traditional songs as an offensive stereotyping. Furthermore, the book also discuss the misleading portrayal of the setting of time. People have suggested that Disney make some clarification about it but they failed to do so. This angered certain group of American society (2004:64). Again this is another evidence that the offensive parts of the movie lays not on the cartoon part of the movie.

Closely examined, it can be inferred that the public negative responses to *Song of the South* was

grounded in their interpretations on the live action of the story, not in the animated representation and the narrative performance of Br'er Rabbit. The first part that potentially creates controversies is the use of Old South dialect by Uncle Remus. For some African Americans it is degrading because it creates racist overtone. The second potential source of controversies is the setting of the story that features a plantation; the place where slaves used to work all day. The film presents a cheerful atmosphere in which slaves work happily and they are singing while working. This portrayal was disturbing and considered a disregard for African American society's dignity. It is as if slavery is a normal practice in agricultural activities.

As for Uncle Remus character, his presence in the film does not only serve as a storyteller but also an instructor for Johnny and Ginny. He guides the two children to think and act in accordance with the prevailing norms and he also teaches them to always rely on the learned positive values to cope with problems and difficulties in life. For some people, this is a positive role that promotes care and compassion between individuals across gender and age. However, for some other, the role implies Uncle Remus' conformity as a slave to the white masters and their families. One of those who disagreed with this portrayal is Donald Bogle who said "Song of the South signalled the demise of the negro as fanciful entertainer or comic servant" (1973: 136)

Apart from the existing controversies, *Song of the South* has given different alternative of teaching positive values through trickster stories. Uncle Remus folktale stories have presented Br'er Rabbit as a trickster figure that represent African American society whereas *Song of the South* presents Br'er Rabbit with no noticeable ethnic identity because of the trickster's transformation in its physical characteristics and its function in the story. In this movie, Br'er Rabbit is a means of instruction through which Uncle Remus teaches Johnny and Ginny, the white children, some positive values to uphold.

## **CONCLUSION**

Br'er Rabbit is African American folk hero which is later adopted in many narratives as a trickster character for American society in general. The

trickster represents its basic nature, which is individual freedom and independence or free will in taking action and decision. Although he is often narrated as a character that will do anything to attain his goal without moral scruples, Br'er Rabbit always survives and keep his dignity in the face of adversities. It is this dual nature that renders Br'er Rabbit a multidimensional character.

Br'er Rabbit's transformation from a figure of folktales into a trickster character in modern narratives is a symbol of progress for African American society. They have transformed from slaves into an empowered members of society. This development is understandable given that oral tradition is the root and the source of printed literature in modern era for African Americans.

In Uncle Remus' folktale version, Br'er Rabbit represents black slaves who make a good use of his ingenuity to get away from troubles and to take revenge on their oppressors. For the slaves this trickster figure represents their experiences in the tradition of slavery in America and also their deepest hopes of freedom. In this particular version, Br'er Rabbit becomes a means of disseminating African American cultural values. They include good deeds, ingenuity, creativity, and forward-looking attitude.

In *Song of the South*, Br'er Rabbit's function as a representation of African American society is removed. The changes in his physical characteristics and temperament have made this trickster turns into a character with ambiguous and paradoxical quality and influence. His transformation in the movie is made for commercial purpose. Thus it is no wonder that Br'er Rabbit's characterization is developed according to its practical function, which is providing moral instruction about what is right to do and what is wrong to do without particular consideration of its racial and cultural background. His appearance as a cartoon figure makes him lack of the serious image he has in Uncle Remus folktale version. He has become an object of entertainment for American public. In agreement with his transformation, the values he represents are the general values of American society and culture which include individual interest, individual achievement, material gain, and individual freedom; it is no longer ethnically specific representation.

Controversies related to Disney's *Song of the South* are a reflection of dynamic changes of values among American society. Shifts in the interpretations of a particular cultural object, i.e. narrative product, occur when there is change(s) in the adoption of media in presenting the object to the public and the long span of the passing period between the previous and the later presentations of the object in a society. This phenomenon can be apprehended as a logical consequence of the dynamic nature of culture. Culture undergoes changes along with the changes that take place in the society where it develops.

#### ENDNOTE

- 1 <http://classics-illustrated.com/uncle/056.jpg> June 13, 2017 at 10:49
- 2 <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/65/98/03/6598035b09757047fef5288c53b3720e.jpg> June 13, 2017 at 10:14
- 3 [https://michelinewalker.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/brer\\_rabbit\\_and\\_tar-baby.jpg](https://michelinewalker.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/brer_rabbit_and_tar-baby.jpg) June 13, 2017 at 10: 08
- 4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXnnAYcVtj0> 2:13 / 3: 54 June 13, 2017 at 10:42
- 5 <http://sohorep.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/mr-fox-and-mr-rabbit2.gif> June 13, 2017 at 10:11
- 6 <http://media-cache-ec0.pinimg.com/236x/49/e1/31/49e13135bd7fa034ec006d2e8309946e.jpg> June 13, 2017 at 10:45

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- Picture 1. Br'er Rabbit illustration in Uncle Remus' stories. <http://classics-illustrated.com/uncle/056.jpg> June 13, 2017 at 10:49.
- Picture 2. Br'er Rabbit illustration in Disney's *Song of The South*. <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/65/98/03/6598035b09757047fef5288c53b3720e.jpg> June 13, 2017 at 10:14.
- Picture 3. Tar Baby in Uncle Remus' stories. [https://michelinewalker.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/brer\\_rabbit\\_and\\_tar-baby.jpg](https://michelinewalker.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/brer_rabbit_and_tar-baby.jpg) June 13, 2017 at 10: 08.
- Picture 4. Tar Baby in Uncle *Song of the South*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXnnAYcVtj02:13 / 3: 54> June 13, 2017 at 10:42.
- Picture 5. *The Laughing Place* in Uncle Remus Stories. <http://sohorep.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/mr-fox-and-mr-rabbit2.gif> June 13, 2017 at 10:11.
- Picture 6. The Laughing Place in *Song of the South*. <http://media-cache-ec0.pinimg.com/236x/49/e1/31/49e13135bd7fa034ec006d2e8309946e.jpg> June 13, 2017 at 10:45.