

# Fabulism vs realism essay examples

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



## **The Opposing Visions of Joel Chandler Harris & Charles W. Chesnutt**

These two extracts exemplify two distinct traditions in African American Literature. In fact, since Harris was of white descent, the Uncle Remus stories as a whole represent a white concept of African American culture, suitably diluted and sanitized, it could be argued, for a predominately white readership. It is true that Harris as an illegitimate son of an Irish immigrant from a very poor background and sporting a vivid shock of very red hair might have felt himself slightly ostracized in Southern society; it is also true that he spent much of his time as an apprentice on the Turnwold plantation, during the American Civil War, seeking out the company of the slaves and that he listened avidly to the folk tales that were part of their oral tradition; but, nonetheless, he was white and the stories considered here are very different in their methodology, substance and impact from Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine". Harris's stories contribute to an infantilization of African American culture; Chesnutt's story is much more subtle in its effects, despite the fact that African American superstition plays a major part in the substance of his story.

A key difference between the two writers is that Harris is clearly writing for children. Apart from Uncle Remus (and ignoring the animals in the tales themselves), the character to whom the stories are addressed is a child – a white child, the "rosy-cheeked chap" (Harris, 511). The very notion of having talking animals getting up to all sorts of mischief is a characteristic we associate with books for children. In general, Harris's Uncle Remus stories might remind us of Aesop's fables – were it not for the fact that Aesop was

writing over 2, 500 years ago at a much more primitive stage of human civilization. The avuncular Uncle Remus could be seen as being presented, unwittingly by Harris presumably, as slightly patronizing to his child listener. For example, when at the end of “ The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story”, the child asks, “ Did the fox eat the rabbit?” (Harris, 511), but Uncle Remus is evasive in his reply. Similarly, in “ Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Mr. Fox” when Uncle Remus mentions Miss Matthews, the child in the story is curious about her identity but Remus does not know, saying, “ Don’t ax me, honey. She wuz in de tale, Miss Matthews en de gals wuz, en de tale I give you like hi’t wer’ gunter me” (Harris, 511). Unsurprisingly, apart from Remus’s fawning and avuncular attitude, there is no hint of the tragic past of slavery in Uncle Remus’s quaint and childish folk tales – which might explain their popularity with white readers since the persona of Uncle Remus confirms a benign stereotype of what it is to be African American – benign and constantly cheerful. There is a narrative ‘ voice’ – that of Harris, but it is straightforwardly used and without irony.

Chesnutt’s story is much more complex and faces up to the reality of slavery by providing its own historical context through the narrative of the former slave who tells the story of the cursed graveyard to the narrator – who is clearly established as a white northerner looking to move into grape farming in North Carolina. This clear identification of the narrative voice as white and from the North adds a completely different dimension to this story, just as the story told by the former slave, because it locates most of the action in the pre-war South, allows a historical perspective on the social progress of African American people. The story of the cursed vineyard does include a fair

measure of superstition – the witch and the curse she places on it, the bizarre events surrounding Henry’s annual near-death and rejuvenation, which in itself leads to Mr. Douglas’s swindling of other slave owners by selling Henry when he is healthy and buying him back when he dwindles – but, although this is delivered in a light-hearted, folksy tone, the story does not flinch from dealing with the realities of slave ownership, the sufferings of the slaves and Mr. Douglas’s death in the Civil War. The Yankee, who in turn swindles Douglas, can almost be seen as the nemesis of not just the vineyard but of the whole corrupt system of slavery and it is his representative who tells the story overall and provides the narrative voice. The point surely is that Chesnutt’s story deals with serious issues and the narrator’s dry and rational response to the convoluted tale of magic and human misery that he has heard:

I bought the vineyard, nevertheless, and it has been for a long time in a thriving condition, and it has been referred to by the local press as a striking illustration of the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries (Chesnutt, 686).

If the story has a symbolic meaning then it is partly that the past of superstition and slavery has been swept away, but it is also that the plight of the rural Southern African Americans remains one of economic exploitation: a far cry from the cute talking animals of Harris.

## **Works Cited**

Chesnutt, Charles W., 1887. “ The Goophered Grapevine”. Pages 678 – 687 in in Baym, Nina (Ed.), 2003. The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume C. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

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