

Contradictory views of african-americans and slavery in "free joe and the rest of...



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Joel Chandler Harris's short story "Free Joe and the Rest of the World" has long been classified as a prominent example of Plantation Tradition literature. Literature in this tradition often portrays African-Americans as clueless, "shiftless" beings who need white supervision to be happy and productive. While many elements of "Free Joe" appear to fit this mold, Harris uses several events in the story to present a more complex view of African-Americans and of slavery in general. Specifically, an alternate reading of the final scene reveals that "Free Joe" is more complex than most Plantation Tradition literature and in some ways critiques the institution of slavery; this reading yields a more precise, complete understanding of Harris's work as a whole. The final scene of Free Joe dead at the foot of the poplar tree stands out from the rest of the short story in both its imagery and the emotions it elicits from the reader. While the majority of the descriptions of Free Joe portray him as a carefree, "shiftless" man, Harris uses his death to reveal the impact of his inability to find his wife, which in turn helps the reader see the injustice of the social and economic system based on slavery. Harris reinforces this notion of injustice by describing Free Joe as "shabby in the extreme." Poverty/shabbiness is linked to the wrong done to Free Joe by the existing social system (20). The last sentence, "A passer-by, glancing at him, could have no idea that such a humble creature had been summoned as a witness before the Lord God of Hosts," contains lofty language that is quite different from the rest of the story (20). This mention of the "Lord God of Hosts" brings a religious element into the reader's mind and helps to show that Free Joe is dignified in his death and that he is rewarded with an acceptance in heaven. All these elements in the final scene present Free Joe as a more complex and human African-American character than those that

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typify the Plantation Tradition. Mr. Staley's outburst upon first seeing Free Joe underneath the poplar also supports a reading of the short story that recognizes Harris's multifaceted views on race and slavery. Upon seeing Free Joe slouching against the tree, Mr. Staley yells at him: " Git up from there, an' go an' arn your livin'" (20). Then he realizes Free Joe is actually dead. The following description of Free Joe, " He was dead... It was if he had bowed and smiled when death stood before him, humble to the last," causes the reader to pity Free Joe and his place in society. However, it does not cause the reader to feel that Free Joe would simply be better off as a slave as does much literature in the Plantation Tradition. The focus here is on Free Joe's sorrow, not his exile from the slave community. Instead the piteous description of Free Joe, contrasted with Mr. Staley's hostility, prompts the reader to question (and possibly abhor) slavery because it has caused Free Joe to lose his dog, wife, and eventually his life. In sum, Harris employs this sharp contrast to create a strong pathos that leads the reader to this more critical view of slavery. Several examples in " Free Joe" support the conventional Plantation Tradition reading of the short story. These instances occur throughout the beginning and middle sections of the story, but after Free Joe loses little Dan to Spite Calderwood's fox-hounds, Harris subtly changes his descriptions of Free Joe. First, immediately following his loss of Dan the author describes Free Joe as " thoughtful enough to have his theory" (18). This acknowledgment of higher-level cognition is distinct from all the previous descriptions of Free Joe's simplicity and simplemindedness. Also, the tragic nature of " his theory," dealing as it does with the improbability of Dan finding Lucinda, emphasizes Joe's humanity and emotions and moves the reader in a way that has not yet been accomplished. This new side of Joe

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is further developed through a dialogue between Becky and Micajah Staley. In response to Free Joe assuring them that Lucinda and Dan are coming back, Micajah says, " Look at that nigger... He's pinc blank as happy now as a killdee by a mill-race." (19). This quotation appears to solidify the idea of Free Joe as simpleminded, but Miss Becky's response illustrates Free Joe's true emotions. She says, " He grins, —an' that's nigger, —but I've ketched his under jaw a-trimblin' when Lucindy's name uz brung up" (19). This revelation of Free Joe's emotional capacity proves he is not as simple as the reader initially believes. It also confirms that Free Joe recognizes the likely fate of Lucinda and Dan but holds on to " his theory" for comfort and a means of making it through each day, which legitimizes his seemingly faulty logic. In conclusion, Harris's choice to incorporate this dialogue in the end of the short story confirms that he did not fully prescribe to Plantation Tradition views; he believed that African-Americans possessed emotional maturity and certain commonalities with white Americans.