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“En ef dern ain’t nuff fer enny man den I done los’ de way”: The Figure of the Devoted Slave as Narrative Technique in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*

1. Introduction: Joel Chandler Harris’s “A Story of the War” as Plantation Fiction

Not only did the Reconstruction era initiate an incorporation and emancipation of the Southern states into the Union, it also caused an evitable cultural confrontation of the two former enemy states, which aimed at coming closer to one another for the first time in American history. The latest literary phenomena of that time, known as Local Color, seized on the demand of cultural convergence aiming at a creation of a unified national identity. Winfried Fluck characterizes the literary phenomenon as “eine Literatur der kulturellen Vermittlung, in der die Inspektion einer fremden Welt zur Bereicherung der eigenen führt” (Fluck 164). And Stephanie Foote stresses that “ate the core of every representation of the native was a foreigner” (13). Thus, what Local Color does is in fact cultural work by trying to fulfil people’s concerns with national matters.

A special subgenre of Local Color, known as plantation fiction, is represented by Joel Chandler Harris’s “Story of the War,” which was published under the title *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* in 1879/1880. It is part of a collection of folktales, which are told by the figure of a former slave called Uncle Remus. Characterized by impressive mansions, Southern belles, cavaliers, and legally free, yet utterly devoted

slaves, plantation narratives obviously entailed a nostalgic longing for the (antebellum) Old South. Reacting to the political, social and economic change in the South after the Civil War, Southern Local Color stories aimed at representing the Southern paternalistic structures in order to convey a more appropriate, a more “authentic” representation of the South and its citizens in contrast to the ones portrayed and published by Northern abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe. Hence, Local Color might be seen as a literary reaction to Stowe’s anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published in 1852, which contributed to the South’s unfavorable political and social image, and thus started to suffer from a bad reputation.

When publishing *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, Harris claimed to give a genuine depiction of the New South, as it was based on, and connected to the Old South. But in fact what he does is give the reader a distorted image of Southern plantation life before and after the war by incorporating several myths. According to Roland Barthes, myth “has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification” (Barthes). *Uncle Remus* is an account of a sentimental, white perception of the Old South’s social order where white supremacy of African Americans is taken for granted. In my paper, I am going to follow literary critic Jennifer Ritterhouse who argues that in stories as “A Story of the War,” narrative techniques of plantation fiction are used in order to let the character of Uncle Remus not only figure as storyteller, but rather perform a political function to the extent that he promotes a Lost Cause view of history (Ritterhouse 589). Stressing the authenticity of Uncle Remus’ personality and dialect, Ritterhouse argues that Harris does not only try to convey his Southern paternalistic attitude towards African Americans, but also tries to stress the former “devoted, familiar and intimate” (ibid.) relationship between master and slave. Therefore, he uses the character of Uncle Remus as a narrative technique in order to spread his pro-slavery propaganda of the New South.

In my paper, I will show that “A story of the War” is an expression of plantation fiction that differs from other Local Color Stories in terms of its special features. It entails quite a different notion of the South in comparison

to other Southern Local Color stories. It therefore can be regarded as exceptional plantation fiction. I will firstly analyze the short story with regard to the characteristics of plantation fiction, putting special emphasize on the use of myths, which are central for this kind of writing. It will be shown where these characteristics and myths are used, and in how far they “do” cultural work in the short story. Afterwards, I will take a closer look at the stories’ special features and investigate them according to myth and cultural work. Lastly, I will offer a short summary of my results in order to prove my thesis, in which I argue that all narrative techniques, especially that of Uncle Remus, are constructed and used as instruments in order to spread pro-slavery propaganda.

## 2. The Characteristics of Plantation Fiction and the Use of Southern Myths

Central to the genre of plantation fiction is the figure of a former slave who is portrayed as childlike, docile and loyal to his former masters through the whole narrative. Although slavery has been abolished, he stays with his masters and voluntarily keeps his position as a servant in the New South’s social and patriarchal/paternalistic system. In Harris’s “A Story of the War,” this figure is represented by Uncle Remus whom the character Miss Huntingdon perceives as a “tall, gray-haired negro,” having a “rugged face” and an appearance, which is “somewhat picturesque” (1). In addition, the description of his voice as “half-confident, half-apologetic” (ibid.) creates an image of a strong character whose experience and advanced age has left traces. Consequently, he might still be perceived as strong but not as dangerous anymore. This description is essential because it re-affirms the stereotypical image of a Southern ex-slave, as it was commonly widespread in the Northern states. Furthermore, it is also noticeable that the figure of Uncle Remus serves as narrator for the inner tale, whereas Miss Huntingdon functions as narrator for the outer tale. As a result, the reader perceives Uncle Remus through the eyes of Miss Theodosia Huntingdon, whose observations are based on a white, female, Northern perspective. Thus, she argues that she is “painfully conscious [...] that Uncle Remus [speaks] from

the standpoint of a Southerner, and with the air of one who expect[s] his hearers to thoroughly sympathize with him” (ibid. 2).

Consequently, Uncle Remus takes the role of a white Southerner although he is black. This creates a contrast to the Northern perspective of Miss Huntingdon. Through the whole short story, Uncle Remus is represented not only as a former slave who sympathizes with the Old South and its hierarchical social structures, he goes one step further by voluntarily taking on a subordinate role, once again, the one of a servant. This is demonstrated when he, sitting down on the steps, starts to tell his story instead of joining the family in the piazza (ibid.), and also when he comes to pick up Mr. Huntingdon’s sister. For example, his solidarity for the South and his political ideology is stressed by telling Miss Huntingdon that he is willing to shoot her brother down although he was fighting as a Yankee soldier for the abolition of slavery and thereby, also for Uncle Remus freedom (ibid.5). His explanation “[c]o’sse, I know all about dat” (ibid.) gives the impression that “dat” is not even worth mentioning. This kind of active “protection” emphasizes importance of Remus’ master for Remus.

This point leads to the second characteristic, namely that of the nostalgic tale of the Old South, which features a harmonious, paternalistic and happy family structure. The inner tales of Uncle Remus and some of his exclamations obviously entail a nostalgic longing for the era of the Old South. He laments about other African Americans who seem to develop into a lazy, dishonest and mistrustful folk (ibid. 2). This is contrasted to the Old South where everything had its fixed order and rules, and where they were hard working and sincere people. Additionally, the reader gets to know about the close relationship between Uncle Remus and Mr. Huntingdon (ibid. 1), and also about the close relationship to the other family members who even call him “daddy” (ibid. 3). The latter might be due to the absence of a master, which turns Uncle Remus into a substitute father who is accepted by his mistress as well as her children Miss Sally and Mars Jeems. It is not explained why a master is missing, but it is a slave whom Mars Jeems and “Ole Miss” trust, and moreover entrust with the responsibility to take care after the place and the other slaves when Mars Jeems fights in the Civil War, and the overseer is withdrawn (ibid.).

As a consequence, slaves are not only shown to be involved in the paternalistic family structure, they are also active members of the family, which is characterized by intimacy, trust and respect. Uncle Remus argues that the slaves “had plenty of clothes and plenty of grub, and they was the fattest niggers in the settlement” (ibid. 3); this demonstrates that they were taken care of. The obvious demonstration of trust and loyalty on the part of Uncle Remus is shown by the invasion of the Yankees. In this case, he could have easily taken advantage of it to successfully in escape from the plantation. But it seems as if this is not an alternative option for him. Consequently, he stays and prepares himself to protect Miss Sally and Ole Miss. Again, he shows his sheer loyalty towards his masters.

The characters who represent “the Southern belle” and “the cavalier” in this plantation narrative are Miss Sally and Mars Jeems. According to the tellings of Uncle Remus they are kind and brave. He portrays vividly how Miss Sally “look straight at de fier” (ibid. 4) when the Yankees come into the house. Ole Miss “never tu’n’er head” and “looked ‘ez prim en ez proud ez if she own de whole county” (ibid.), which demonstrates how brave, honorable and full of virtues both women are for Remus. Also, Mars Jeems is depicted as a Southern planter who, in the first year, rejected to participate in the war because of his old mother and his sister, but then decided to become a Confederate soldier and to prove Southern chivalry, manly virtue and honor.

Closely connected to the formal characteristics of plantation fiction is the use of myths. According to George B. Tindall, the myth of the Old South which includes the plantation myth, the cavalier myth and moonlight-and-magnolia myth, is “a dominant literary and cultural construct for northerners and southerners alike, [evoking] images of kindly old master [...], happy darkies singing in the field, coquettish belles wooed by slender gallant” (1079). Like Barthes, also Tindall proves the point that the use of this myth serves to construct an image of the Old South, which has never existed and which fulfils the one and only purpose to manipulate the readership. By using the nostalgic longing for an Old South, including the Southern belle as well as the cavalier, the myth of the Old South is obviously provoked and seeks to support and deepen this constructed image of an Old South.

### 3. “A Story of the War” and Its Special Narrative Features

Although Harris’s “A Story of the War” fulfils the major criteria in order to pass as plantation fiction, there are a number of special features, which do not seem to fit into the genre. As mentioned before, one further characteristic of this kind of literature is the character of an old master, who is apparently missing in Harris’s short story. This does not cause any damage to the frame, because the paternal structures are still upheld by the male figure of Mars Jeems who is the next most accepted authority within the family. But it allows the character of Uncle Remus to take the role of a substitute father and by doing so to stress the intimate slave-master relation within these hierarchical and paternal family structures.

Thus, Master Jeems not only seems to take the role of Uncle Remus’ master, he also seems to represent the cavalier myth at first sight. As planter and the one and only son, he bravely decided to fight as a Confederate soldier in the Civil War and to stand for his Southern virtues and ideals (ibid. 3). But at second sight, there is also a second cavalier who is not as visible, because he had to undergo a development in order to become a cavalier. It is Mr. Huntingdon who also became a soldier and who fought for his country, although for the “wrong” one. But this circumstance is relativized due to his marriage with Miss Sally, “the male members of whose family had achieved considerable distinction in the Confederate army” (ibid. 1). This means that by moving to the South (ibid.) and by marrying a Southern belle, he also becomes a Southern cavalier despite his origin and his career as a Union soldier. Additionally, this marriage symbolizes a reconciliation of the two former enemy states. By providing a cavalier and a belle of both regions and letting them marry, the readers might assume that the cultural difference between the two different societies can be overcome. Consequently, the alliance of the two characters functions entirely according to the notion of Local Color whose score entails the mediation between two different cultures.

As a result, and as Ritterhouse states, “A Story of the War” indeed provokes the myth of a Lost Cause (cf. 589) where “noble, virtuous Christians warriors, the highest product of the Old South, [defend] the southern homeland from rapacious Yankees” (Tindall 1097), and lose the war only because of technical inferiority (ibid.). Uncle Remus describes how brave his master went to the war and also how brave Ole Miss and Miss Sally behaved when the Union

soldiers entered their mansion. But in comparison to other Local Color stories, there is one major difference. The “Yankees” are not perceived as evil, or as rapacious. Quite the opposite is the case. Whenever the former slave mentions the Union soldiers, he does this in an acknowledging way, stating how “[d]ey wuz mighty perlite” (ibid. 4). This marks a new era in history. Due to the hostility of the two states and especially the Civil War, the South usually tended to represent Northerners as evil and ruthless people who differ culturally and humanely from the virtuous, sincere and brave Southerners. The positive depiction of the Northerners and the intercultural marriage of Mr. Huntingdon and Miss Sally show a new literary tendency. Hence, this reflects a change in society’s common thinking. This new tendency is based upon the desire for reconciliation of the two former enemy states. In order to implement this, it is crucial to depict the Union soldiers as nearly as virtuous as the Southerners, and not as evil anymore. Consequently, the myth of a Lost Cause also undergoes a transformation in so far that the Union soldiers are not characterized by evil forces anymore. As a result, this change of narrative techniques allows the Northern readers to sympathize with the South. It smoothes the way for a new national identity.

Another point which differs from the standard of other Local Color stories is the aspect of time, which is characterized by timelessness in order to offer a contrast to the fast and urban life of Northern cities. But what Harris’s short story does, is give several time references, which allow the reader not only to localize the setting of the outer and inner frame as Georgia (ibid. 1), but also to specify the time in general. As a result, the outer tale is dated around 1870 (ibid.), whereas the inner tale refers to the period of the Civil War (ibid. 3). Next to this, there are two different settings, the outer tale is set in Atlanta, in the New South where Mr. Huntingdon “was practicing law” (ibid. 1). The setting of the inner tale is Putmon where Mars Jeems’ house lies; this setting refers to the Old South (ibid. 2). The two different time frames show a cultural development. Five years after the Civil War, Miss Sally is willing to marry a Union soldier who tried to shoot down her brother. One again, this leads to the assumption that a union between North and South is possible.

The different perspective and attitude of the two former enemies is expressed by the figure of Miss Huntingdon and Uncle Remus who each represent a state.

This is an extraordinary construction in so far as Miss Huntingdon allows insight into her thoughts, and comments on Uncle Remus and his inner tale. Consequently, one gets to know that she expected to explore a “remote and semi-barbarous” region (ibid.1), and that she feels “painfully conscious [...] that Uncle Remus spoke from the standpoint of a Southerner” (ibid. 2). She functions as mirror that reflects the stereotypical attitudes towards Southerners, whereas Uncle Remus symbolizes Old Southern thinking. In this way, two different cultures do not only clash in form of the characters of Miss Sally and Mr. Huntingdon clash, but also in the form of Miss Huntingdon and Uncle Remus. These two clashes only differ in their ending. On the one side, the marriage of Miss Sally and Mr. Huntingdon offers a happy ending. On the other side, Miss Huntingdon and Uncle Remus’ cultural conflict ends in her exclamation that the former slave was willing to shoot her brother down even though he knew her brother was fighting for the abolition of slavery (ibid 5). Moreover, because of him, her brother loses his arm. Remus answers that Mr. Huntington got a new family as an exchange. His final sentence, “[e]n ef dem ain’t nuff fer enny man den I done los’ de way” (5) stresses once again, what the paternal structure of the Old South offered, namely unconditional devotion and love for the family.

#### 4. Conclusion

By establishing the devoted former slave Uncle Remus, Harris knows exactly how to construct a persuasive plantation narrative and moreover, an image of an Old and New South in a skilled way. Nearly all characteristics of a plantation fiction are established and described by the former slave. And especially his use of “genuine” speech might convince the Northerner readership of the tale’s “authenticity.” All in all, it is a successful plantation narrative, which obviously entails a sentimental longing for the Old South and its past. Due to the figure of Uncle Remus who takes the role of a Southerner although he is a former slave, the reader is convinced of the “good old times” when even slaves were happy. Now, after the war they seek this past. Consequently, the character of Uncle Remus, as Ritterhouse states, not only functions as a storyteller, but rather performs a political function to the extent that the story spreads pro-slavery propaganda and gives a false and constructed image of the Old South and even the New South. Yet



the analysis has shown that “A Story of the War” is an unusual expression of Local Color because of its uncommon features. Unlike previous plantation fiction, “A Story of the War” aims at reconciliation of the two former enemy states and thus represents the Northerners in a positive way and not as diabolic and dishonorable people anymore. This reaches its climax by the symbolic marriage of Mr. Huntingdon and Miss Sally who represent the successful union of the North and the South. Therefore, Harris’s story might be seen as a modified plantation narrative, which now not intends to present “the Southerners’ perspective of the War,” but also aims at the reconciliation of both cultures. Hence, “A Story of the War” is an expression of post-Civil War plantation narrative (Mackethan 209).

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I hereby declare that the work submitted is my own and that all passages and ideas that are not mine have been fully and properly acknowledged. I am aware that I will fail the entire course should I include passages and ideas from other sources and present them as if they were my own.

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Signature

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Date