

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 5: Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908)

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E-Mail: Dec. 17, 1999: >I enjoyed your web page on Mr. Harris...and I have a dumb question, was Mr. Harris African-American? I cannot tell from the picture...and everything I have read doesn't mention his race.

Reply: No question is dumb. Joel Chandler Harris was a white man, born of poor parents, who at thirteen left home and became an apprentice to Joseph Addison Turner, a newspaper publisher and plantation owner. It is at this plantation, Turnwold, that Harris first heard the black folktales that were to make him famous. PPR



(Source: [Joel Chandler Harris](#))

Primary Works

Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings, 1880; *Mingo, and Other Sketches in Black and White*, 1884; *Free Joe, and Other Georgian Sketches*, 1887; *Gabriel Tolliver: a Story of Reconstruction*, 1902; *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*, 1955.

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| [Top](#) | Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Seanna A. Neuman

"Humor is an excellent thing to live by, and all things being equal, an excellent thing to die by." - Joel Chandler Harris

Joel Chandler Harris was born on December 9, 1848 in Eatonton, Georgia to Mary Harris and an Irish laborer who soon left Harris and his mother behind to care for themselves. Harris' illegitimacy later became the subject for many of his works. Harris and his mother lived in a little cottage given to them by a caring citizen of Eatonton. Because of Harris' history he grew up to be shy, insecure, and developed a speech impediment.

In 1862, by the time he had turned fourteen years old, he had dropped out of school and began working as a literary apprentice to help his mother with the finances. He was hired to work on a plantation called Turnwold which was owned by Joseph Addison Turner. Turner started a weekly newspaper known as the *Countryman* in which Harris was hired as printer's devil (Bickley 18). Harris remained at Turnwold for four years gaining professional experience under Turner himself. Harris saw Turner as the father he had never had (Bickley 19).

In his free time, Harris used the plantation's library to study authors such as Chaucer, Dickens, Milton, and Poe. Edgar Allan Poe was the biggest influence on Harris' writing. Although Harris wrote many essays and queries for the *Countryman*, his love was in writing poetry in the same form as Poe. When Harris was not studying authors in the library or working on the paper, he was spending time in the quarters with the plantation's slaves listening to folk tales, animal fables, and learning the dialect that slaves used. In a biography of Joel Chandler Harris, Paul M. Cousins states that Harris' experiences at Turnwold gave him the necessary training in the art of developing a competent writing style (48).

In 1866, Harris had taken a job as a typesetter with the Macon Telegraph. This job opened doors for expansion in the literary world. He became the associate editor of *Savannah Morning News* by 1870. With the success of his career he also became acquainted with Esther LaRose with whom he fell in love with and married on April 20, 1873. Esther and Harris had two children by 1876 and then had seven more in the years to come. Three of their children died. Bickley suggests that Harris's new life and family provided the psychological still point around which Harris's journalistic career could turn,... (29).

Harris and his family left Savannah and moved to Atlanta trying to escape a yellow fever epidemic. He became associate editor of the *Constitution* giving it national recognition. Harris was a full-time editor for the *Constitution*, but over a period of four years, he made a transition to a part-time author (Cousins 95). When Harris was asked to write dialect stories for the paper, he recalled the time he spent at Turnwold and began composing stories about an old Black he gave the name of Uncle Remus. The first *Uncle Remus* sketch was published in 1876. According to Cousins, a new and original character had been created in American fiction (96). The Uncle Remus stories appealed to readers from all different backgrounds. It was appealing, as Bickley points out, because Harris took the common man...and vested him with canniness, humor, and either power or compassion (xi). The *Uncle Remus* series became instant classics.

Harris began writing editorials for the Sunday edition of the *Constitution* known as *Literature in the South*. Cousins states that Harris was crying out in the long-established romantic tradition of Southern literature and calling for reform (110). He wanted to preserve the dialect of the plantation Negroes because he did not want future historians misinterpreting the meaning of his works. Because of his work at retaining the dialect of the plantation Negroes, he became an authority in folklore gaining the attention of scientific folklorists at the Bureau of Ethnology and the Smithsonian Institute (Cousins 111).

Between 1876 and 1881, Harris published thirty-four stories to add to his Uncle Remus series and gained the attention of famous authors such as Mark Twain and George W. Cable. Cousins points out that Twain admired Harris' work of Uncle Remus and initiated correspondence with him expressing his appreciation of Uncle Remus saying it is a work of artistic creation (121).

While still working for the Constitution, in 1887 he started another collection of fiction calling it *Free Joe and Other Georgian Sketches*. Free Joe and the Rest of the World, the title piece, was Harris's favorite piece of work. This story was based on actual events he recalled as a young boy in Eatonton. Bickley writes this was Harris's favorite because he perhaps realized that he had achieved almost perfect esthetic balance among sentiment, tragedy, and realism in his study of the plight of a free black man who is alienated from the slave community as well as from the white man's world (114).

Harris was known as a master storyteller of his time. He would go outside of himself and become the heart and soul of the plantation Negro who was at the opposite end of the social structure... (Cousins 147). According to Bickley, Harris, like most Southerners of his day would admit that the Negro should probably have a separate place in society, although he should have the right to elevate himself according to his abilities (xiv).

From 1887 to 1899 he wrote several more stories about Georgian slaves. In 1900 he retired from the Constitution. He enjoyed his free time with his family, bird-watching, and tending to his garden. He became almost as productive in his retirement as he had during the 1890's. He wrote essays for *The World's Work* and wrote short stories for the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1902, with his health declining, he received an honorary Doctorate of Literature from Emory College (Bickley 56).

Between 1903 and 1905 Harris collected all of the Uncle Remus stories and put them together to be published. In 1905 he was elected a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Among the authors selected to the Academy, Harris was the only Southern writer elected. From 1906 to 1907 Harris and his son Julian started the *Uncle Remus Magazine*, which he changed to *The Optimist*, where he became author and editor.

In May 1908 he became ill and was diagnosed with acute nephritis and cirrhosis of the liver. While he was on bed rest, Harris was Baptized a Catholic. Joel Chandler Harris died on Friday, June 3, 1908 at the age of fifty-nine.

Cousins writes that Harris was a pioneer in leading Southern literature from the ultraromantic to realism (222). From a poor, shy, and insecure child blossomed a famous author. Although critics believe that had Harris lived longer and continued to write, he would have nothing more to offer his readers. Harris was popular during his time because he felt for the characters he wrote about and always supported the underdog because of his own unfortunate history.

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