



JOHN AND OLD MARSTER

NEGRO FOLK TALES

One of the most significant areas in American Negro folklore is a cycle of humorous stories involving the relationship between a slave, usually called John, and Old Marster, or Old Boss. There are tantalizing areas for sociological and psychological analyses in the curious relationships between slave and master, in the subtle and sometimes ambiguous satirical overtones, and in the often wildly fanciful images suggestive of the strangeness of dreams.

The stories frequently appeal to the ordinary person's need to deaden the pangs of a sense of inferiority. If the principal character in the stories is a numskull, the listener will enjoy his superiority to the ridiculous stupidity of the anti-hero. With most of the following stories, the narrator and his audience are apt to think of themselves as sophisticated individuals poking fun at a naive country Negro. Moreover, where the protagonist is physically puny or poverty-stricken, the narrator and his audience enjoy indentifying with the little man who either through luck or through shrewd trickery defeats frighteningly powerful opponents.

An example of the trickster hero appears in the John and Old Marster cycle in the "Champion Swimmer."

Now back in slavery times, Granddaddy told me this. Marster had a fellow, they call him Tom, had him under bondage. And Tom was a great swimmer, he could swim. And he told the Marster if he find "a man that'll outswim me I could outswim, would you let me go free?"

He said, "Yes, Old Tom, I can get a man can beat you swimmin'. And I'll let him go free."

He said, "Oh no. I can outswim anybody you bring me here."

Granddaddy said Marster went and got a fellow from overseas somewhere it was. They gonna swim across the Atlantic.

And he said, "Now, Tom, what would you need to swim a hike like that?"

He said, "I'll get the fellow here in the mornin'." He said, "We'll have him here in the mornin'."

He [Tom] said, "Well, what time, Boss?"

"Well, you have him here about seven o'clock in the mornin' 'cause it's gonna take that long a time."

So Marster brought the fellow there for Tom to swim by across the ocean. He said, "Now look after you get here, what is you gonna need?"

He said, "I'll tell you in the mornin' what I'll need to swim across there."

So, when he brought the fellow there he asked him what he was goin' to need to swim across there. He said, "I don't need nothin' but just need me a swimmin' trunk."

So he asked Tom what did he want. Tom said, "I want a barrel of flour, then I want me a cooking stove, and then I'm gonna need about a ton of coal. And I want a deck of cards."

Marster said, "What is you gonna do with the stove?"

Tom said, "I'm gonna cook and eat while I'm swimmin'."

"What you gonna do with the cards?"

"I be playin' cards till my food get done."

He said, "What else you gonna need, Tom?"

He said, "Well, I'll need a bed, and I'll need a dresser."

Say, "Tom, what you gonna do with the bed?"

Say, "I can lay down and sleep too while I'm swimmin'."

Say, "What you gonna do with the dresser?"

Say, "I can look in the glass, see how my feet are workin'."

The other swimmer he had there, he was gettin' nervous. He hadn't swim with no man that wanted all that.

He said, "Tom, think that's all you need?"

He said, "Well, I would want me a gun and about five boxes of shells."

Other one listened at him, who was gonna swim with him. He said, "Look, Tom, swimmin' you don't need no gun and shells."

"Yes, Sir, one of them ducks may fly across and I'd have to shoot him."

He said, "That many shells?"

He said, "Well, swimmin' that far, no tellin' what I'll run in, would come by me, flyin' over me or in the water. I got time to shoot him while I'm swimmin'. I can just naturally swim that good."

So Marster said to the other fellow, "Well, you ready to try him?" The other fellow he had there with him, this fellow told him, said, "No, any damned person want all that, Sir, that's just makin' a crop. I couldn't swim with him. Lay off that swimmin'."

For most people life is drab and chaotic; hence when the folk artist transforms the disorderly or commonplace into something which has structure and style, which sparkles with imaginatively pictured scenes, he stirs his audience to amused delight.

The tone of the stories is comic, but as is frequently true of minority groups, the humor often displays self-mockery. With notable frequency, the plot culminates with the defeat of the Negro: he is the ridiculous butt of a joke. A typical example is found in "John and the Stones."

Spoken:

Look-a here, a guy, call him John.

In Marster's time, told John, say, "John, All your colored people believe in God?"

He told him, he say, "Yassuh, Boss, I believe in God."

He says, uh, "Where do you pray at, John?"

John said, "Boss, I prays over yonder by that big oak tree."

He says, "What time you start to prayin', John?"

He says, "Boss, around about 6:30, Boss."

Well Old Marster he had two little boys, you know,

An' they got a sack an' got some stones in it.

He put 'em up in that tree.

Old John down on his knees.

Sung:

"Oh Lord, have mercy, oh Lord, have mercy.

Give me religion, Lord, give me religion, Lord,

If you give me truly foundation religion,

Drop somethin' on my head, let me feel it."

Spoken:

Little boy dropped one of them stones [on his] head.

Sung:

Hit him on the head, say "Baff!"

He said, "Now thank you, Jesus, thank you, Jesus.

If you give me truly foundation,

Lord, drop a little harder."

Spoken:

Boy dropped a little bigger stone, you know.

Sung:

He said, "I thank you, Jesus, thank you, Jesus,

Thank you, Jesus, thank you, Jesus.

Lord, you give my truly foundation religion,

Drop a little bit harder."

Spoken:

Well, you know, the little boy, you know,

He said, "Drop a little harder,"

He had a great big old stone, you know.

Sung:

He turned that stone loose.

Hi! Old John in the head.

Old John, knocked him out.

When Old John come back to, he said, "Look."

He looked up in the air, he said,

"Jesus, that the way you got to give me religion?

Knock me out? Take your religion on back to heaven.

I'm gonna stay down here and do the best I can do. Please, now."

Why do Negroes laugh at this story which makes one of them the butt of Old Marster's sadistic joke at the expense of John's literal faith in God's intervention in his affairs? There is of course the obvious appeal of the numskull story. At the same time the story directs elements of sophisticated satire against the old-fashioned stereotype of the naive Negro who is gullible enough to have an intense religious faith and to believe that there is any escape to a happier and more just place in either this world or a next one. The skillful use of the religious satire suggests the creative intelligence of a sophisticated, cynical observer, the narrator, who relishes his own superiority and savors the melancholy wisdom of the disenchanting—there is no pie in the sky, only stones.

In many of the tales in the cycle the contest of wit and trickery ends with Old Marster as the victim of the joke, often in the popular folk pattern of the strong formidable figure defeated by the weak ordinary person through cunning, trickery, or luck, as in the European and American Jack tales or the Negro Br'er Rabbit tales. But even in such John and Old Marster stories the action is often seen through the mocking eyes of a sophisticated narrator who pierces both slave and master with the comic barb. This is true of "Two at the Gate."

One I can remember my father used to tell me about it a lotta time when I was quite young in those days. An' so he'd sit down an' tell me what his father used to tell him an' his father told him. So the old story kep' a-goin'.

An' so he told me this one about one of the slaves, how he tricked his — in a way — tricked his master into somethin' that he wasn't expectin'.

So his master couldn't walk so he had this guy, his slave, to roll him aroun' in a wheel chair. An' so that night he let him off. An' so this guy, this colored guy, he goes to see his girl friend that night. So the moon was shinin' an' the weather was good. An' so he goes to see his girl friend.

An' at the same time it was two more Negroes went out stealin' one night, stealin' chickens. An' so they had these gunny sacks with them to put the chickens in after they steal 'em. They steal the chickens, then they would tie thei' legs together so in case-a one would get a-loose he couldn't get very far. They could ketch him easy. So, anyway they stole the chickens an' they put 'em in the sacks. An' so in walkin' along goin' back home, one says to the other, says, "Say, listen, we got to divide these chickens an' whereabouts?" Says, "We don't wanta sit alongside the road to do it. Somebody may come along an' see us with the chickens. Say, wonder where could we go?"

So the other guy says, "I tell you a good place we won't be bothered with nobody. Nobody passin' or nothin'. They sho' ain't comin' there."

He says, "Where's that?"

He says, "Let's stop in the cemetery. Say, nobody visits there, not at night, especially."

He say, "That's right, that is a good place."

So they stopped at the cemetery. An' goin' in at the gate two of the old hens got out the bag an' the other one stopped to try an' get'm. He says, "No, that's all right. Let's hurry on in here an' we can get these two when we be comin' out. Say, they can't get nowhere, thei' legs tied."

"Okay, yeah, that's right!"

So they went up there in the cemetery. An' either one of them didn't have any kind o' education or nothin'. They didn't know how to count good. So he says, "I'll tell you how we'll do it. Since you an' I ne'er one don't know how to count, say, as I get one chicken out I'll say, 'That one yours,' an' I get the next one, I'll say, 'This one mine.' We can divide'm like that."

He says, "Yeah, that's a good idea."

So they was doin' that. An' this guy was comin' back from his girl friend's. It was gettin' kinda late an' the road went right by the cemetery. So he got along there an' he heard 'em countin'. One said, "This one mine, that one yours." Well, he knowed that was the cemetery. "Oh my God!" said, "Must be Judgment Day! God an' the Devil dividin' souls!"

So he took out an' run home. He got home, poundin' on the door, "Wake up Old Marster, wake up, wake up!"

He said, "What's the matter with you?"

Say, "Wake up, it's Judgment Day!"

He says, "You crazy?"

Says, "No, I'm not crazy. God an' the Devil is down there in the cemetery dividin' souls, right now. If you don't believe it, get up an' get in your chair, an' I'll roll you down there an' let you hear 'em yourself."

He says, "All right, I'm goin', an' I'm gonna take my shotgun with me. An' if you fool me down there, an' they ain't doin' that, I'm gonna shot ya."

He say, "Well okay, you welcome, Old Boss, you welcome. Get in your chair."

So they rolled him on down there an' rolled him up to the gate, near the gate. An' he say, "Now you listen." An' they was near about through countin', "This one mine, that one yours."

Say, "You hear'm, don't ya?" Old Boss then he commenced to get interested in it too. He believed it too hisself then.

An' so way after a while they got the last chickens in. An' the other one remembered, says "Wait a minute."

He says, "What?"

"Say, you remember we got two at the gate."

An' Old Marster thought he was talkin' about him an' the guy he had hired wheelin' him. He says, "It's two at the gate."

Then the Negro said, "Yeah, say, Old Boss, two at the gate, talkin' about us!"

An' Old Marster jumped out the wheel chair — he hadn't walked in years, jumped out the wheel chair. He say, "You can bring the chair on with you."

That's the first time he's walked in years. He thought it was Judgment Day too. He fooled him.

Son House found the story amusing and memorable as a result of the comic reversal of roles: the ignorant chicken thieves outwit the educated and supposedly wise master. But he was engaging in double-edged satire, poking fun at the gullibility of both master and slave. The original teller and those who repeated the story relished the discomfiture of the Olympian Old Marster, but the sophisticated narrator and the amused listeners also relish their sense of superiority to those above them in power and those below them in intelligence.

Humor of greater complexity occurs in some of the tales in the cycle, as for example in "John an' the Owl."

Spoken:

Old John he stole his Marster's sheep;
He went out in the woods an' he killed that sheep,
So Old John butchered that sheep an' he carried it on home.

Sung:

His family was hongry,

Spoken:

Didn't have nothin' to eat,
So when he was comin' back alone,
He was ridin' a little donkey,
Old owl way down on ole snag,
Old owl holler, "Yesterday evenin',
You stole that sheep, sheep, sheep."
Old John begin to get worried, you know;
He was worried an' he said,

Sung [a moaning spiritual tune]:

"Mm, hmm,-----."

Spoken:

So his mind struck him,
"You better pray, that may be Jesus."
Old John didn't know that was a owl;
He thought it was Jesus because his mind
Hinted to him that was Jesus.
An' Jesus gonna tell his Old Marster
'Bout he stole one o' his sheep.
Old John he got down off his donkey,
He started to pray, he say,

Sung:

"Oh Lawd, oh Lawd, if You just forgive me,
You know, Jesus, You know, Jesus,
My family was hongry,
An' I had nothin' to eat,
I went an' stole the sheep,
An' I butchered the sheep.

Sung:

I carried it on home for my family to eat;
Oh Lawd, forgive me, Jesus,
I won't be this guilty no mo'."

Spoken:

Well, the owl he look down, you know,

Seen him comin', crawlin' on his knees;
He didn't know what to make o' that, if it was a man.
The poor owl was hongry himself.
The owl said, "Yesterday evenin'
You stole that sheep, sheep, sheep."
Well, Old John he crawl near 'bout to that snag.

Sung:

"Oh Lawd, oh Lawd, You must forgive me, Jesus this time,
I'll never be that guilty no mo'."

Spoken:

Old owl he got long feathers on the side o' his head,
Make them look like ears.
Well, that time Old John had crawl to the bottom o' the snag;
He look up at him, he say,
"Long-eared Jesus an' feather-legged God,
I told You just forgive me,
I never be that guilty no mo'."
Old owl, he said it again,
"Yesterday evenin' you stole that sheep, sheep, sheep."
He looked up again, he say,
"Oh Lawd, long-eared Jesus, feather-legged God,
Told You Goddamn,
If You just forgive me,
I never be that guilty no mo'.
Told You, Goddamn,
My family was hongry,
I didn't have nothin' to eat,
Goddamn, You know, Jesus,
That is a po' way to be,
When yo' family hongry,
You got to get somethin' to eat.
Now You can go on down,
Tell Old Marster that I stole the sheep,
I tole You, Goddamn,
If You just forgive me,
Goddamn, I never be this guilty no mo';
Now You can go down an' tell Ole Marster,
Goddamn, I done stole one of his sheeps,
I done kill that sheep,
Now me an' my family gonna eat that sheep up,
An' Goddamn You!"

The account is built around a central ironic contrast. On the one hand, there is the credulous John who has faith in God's mercy, on the other, the sophisticated Negro who is telling the story. John commits a crime to feed his starving family; when confronted with the awesome figure of a horned owl on a tree at night, he takes it for a menacing Jesus, on the side of law rather than mercy, in league with Old Marster. The figure to whom John prays and humbles himself takes on Godlike status through John's predisposition to believe in Jesus. Ironically, the owl is a suffering fellow creature, like John, desperate for something to eat. In the context the picture is wildly comic: John moves closer and closer, praying more and more fervently to "long-eared, feather-legged Jesus," while the owl keeps relentlessly and unforgivingly intoning his accusation. At the same time, the situation has seriously ironic implications. Implicit in it is the suggestion that the scene represents the essence of religion—a suffering, guilt ridden simpleton, praying for forgiveness to a creation of his own imagination, born of his own will to believe. The tale concludes with the simple John losing his faith and approaching the attitude of the cynical and skeptical narrator. Finally, the powerful conclusion in which John damns God retains ironic comicality since John invokes God in damning God—unable to abandon completely a pattern of speech and thought which have so long been part of him.

Although the discussion of the foregoing tales in the John and Old Marster cycle makes no claim to explaining the psychological aspects of all the plot patterns, the principles throw light on the functional dynamics of many of them. The numskull motifs are satisfying to the egos of narrator and listener. At a more complex level, many of the tales are told within an ironic framework in which the values and beliefs of an old-fashioned country Negro, an Uncle Tom, are seen through the eyes of a cynical, disillusioned Negro. In these stories there is a striking and ironically comic incongruity between two opposed views of reality. The story sometimes ends with the archetypal country Negro stumblingly reaching a conclusion like that of the narrator. The latter overcomes his latent anxiety in attacking powerful institutions like slavery, plantation ownership, and God by sharing his societal anxiety and guilt feelings with the listener. "When he succeeds in making his audience laugh, he has attained not only approval, but acknowledgement and momentary admiration." While such tales have been important as entertainment, they have also functioned significantly as a mechanism for emotional survival.