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Writing Tricksters

Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature

Jeanne Rosier Smith

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For Brian, Ben, and Katherine

As one of the best-known and most widely told of Br'er Rabbit's adventures, the tar baby tale has appeared in countless contexts—from its traditional African antecedents, to Joel Chandler Harris's plantation frame, to a Disney movie (Werner 155). Though historical change and the specific context of each telling inevitably frame the folktale along differing lines, Morrison's *Tar Baby* does not merely produce another version of the tale. Morrison herself emphasizes that she did not read any version of the tale before writing the novel; she relied on her own memory rather than “trust the literature and the sociology of other people to help me know the truth of my own cultural sources” (“Memory” 386). In *Tar Baby*, Morrison explores the tale's provocative and paradoxical implications in order to suggest the trickster's visionary, culture-building potential.

The novel's title invites comparison to the tar baby tale. Briefly, the tale involves a farmer (or sometimes Br'er Bear) who sets a “tar baby” by the side of the road to trap Br'er Rabbit. In many, but not all versions, the tar baby is specifically gendered as female. When Br'er Rabbit passes by, he greets the tar baby, who does not respond; angered, Br'er Rabbit swats at her repeatedly until he is completely affixed to the tar. While the farmer deliberates over an appropriate punishment, the trickster begs him to do anything but throw him in the briar patch, which the farmer, of course, immediately does. Br'er Rabbit laughingly escapes, calling out that the briar patch is his home.¹⁹ The tale highlights Br'er Rabbit's recognition and manipulation of the farmer's cruelty and blindness. It also emphasizes that Br'er Rabbit can be duped by illusion but that he ultimately saves himself by remembering his “home,” or cultural roots.

Much criticism of the novel has focused on Morrison's use of the tale, particularly as it plays out in the relationship between Son and Jadine.²⁰ Son quickly emerges as the outlaw thief who gets “stuck on” the European-educated, western-formed “tar baby” Jadine. This identification made, however, the permutations of the tar baby story in the novel become convoluted: though Son displays many of the trickster's features, Jadine also displays some; moreover, each must struggle against the adhesive, entrapping “tar” of the other, and each envisions a very different briar patch, or safe home. The struggle between them becomes a struggle over African American culture, waged through competing gendered images of the trickster and competing cultural values associated with tar. Additionally, Morrison includes a third trickster, the mythical, visionary, and apparently marginalized Therese. A blind seer, Therese disrupts the polarity of the Son-Jadine conflict, challenges the limits of western perception, and affirms the primacy of ancestral roots to communal identity through her connection to the island's mythical swamp or tar women.

Son, certainly, is the classic trickster, a nameless outlaw, a masterful storyteller, a catalyst whose presence disrupts the tenuously held serenity of the social order. Son's fluidity allows him to manage “a face for everybody” and a different story for each circumstance (*TB* 142, 143). Like Br'er Rabbit in the farmer's garden, Son hides and steals food scraps where he can, drinking bottled Evian in a modern variation on the traditional well water of the tale. Like Gerry Nanapush, *Love Medicine's* modern Nanabozho, the outlaw Son uses his trickster capabilities to avoid imprisonment: “In eight years he'd had seven documented identities and