

The Quarters

David Smith

In a Tortoiseshell:

*In this excerpt of his short story, David Smith exemplifies how **key elements of writing** taught in academic contexts are essential to other, unconventional forms of composition. In particular, the author displays the role of **motive, methodology, and conventions** in a work of fiction.*

Excerpt

Lilith hopped into Uncle Remus' lap just like always.

There was a groan as she made an impact on his tender limbs. She wanted him to take her up in his arms just like always, but he was still. The old chair shifted in their quarters, unsettling the dust that freckled the air with the muddy green light that seeped through the window.

“Please Papa, tell me again how Brer Coyote finally got tricked!”

Uncle Remus closed his eyes as if to remember the story, as if he hadn't told this same tale many times to Lilith.

“One time, way back yander, fore the sky wus brown and fore the big house rose up all shiny-like from the desert, and fore you wus borned, honey, Brer Coyote, cunnin an darin, wus not part-ic-u-larly jealous. He trotted the deep delta as happy as cud be, for he jus gone an did a maganifeecent hunt. As he trotted pass a bushel of reeds, he ain't help but notice the joyful splashes reaching high bove the delta. The water lay low, revealin Brer Alligator and 'is folks.

‘Brer Alligator,’ sezee, ‘what is the occashun for this display of splashin and thrashin in our dear delta?’

‘Why Brer Coyote,’ sezee, ‘we’re praktising our akwatic ensembel for the King’s festival tomorra! He’s giving out a prize to the most talented anamul, a gift of they choice! And we are just champing at the bit to win. You cudn’t possbly on count of yo lack o fam’ly.’

Brer Coyote wus mighty impressed by the thundrus splashin and the rollin waves of the gators, but he wus not part-ic-u-larly jealous. He wen on 'is trot, movin on furtha upstream. It wusn't long fore he heard the CRaaaaaCK of the horns of Brers Ram.

‘Brers Ram,’ sezee, ‘I ain’t neva seen you two charge with such vi-gor! What is the occashun for such glorious dueling on this fine day?’”

Lilith fidgeted.

Uncle Remus swallowed with difficulty.

“Do you have som’in to say, honey?”

“Why Brer Coyote talk so fancy?” Lilith puffed out her breast and put her fists on her hips. “Vi-gor sezee.”

“I reckon when yo thinkin machine ain’t workin, it starts pumpin out all sort of fancified words,” Uncle Remus said. Lilith giggled and gently placed her finger on the bridge of her father’s wrinkled nose as if to say Papa, youse speakin like Brer Coyote e’ry now an then. That’s what she said every time, so it wasn’t hard to guess.

Uncle Remus scowled before giving in to a blackened smile.

“And?” Lilith said impishly.

“Shut yo kissa fore I smack it right off.” Uncle Remus chuckled weakly before continuing on.

“‘Why Brer Coyote,’ Brers Ram replied, ‘we’re praktisin our kataklisimik clashes for tomorra’s festival! It’s in the King’s onur, ya know.’”

He knew.

‘You ain’t born with no mighty horns like us, though. It ain’t nachural fo the likes of youse to win.’ But of course, Brer Coyote wus not part-ic-u-larly jealous. The horns of the Brers Ram made him mighty impressed, though. But he just kept on trottin along the rivaside.

Uncle Remus’ eyes began to close, and his body began to deflate. Lilith shrieked, and began thrashing about, driving her knees and fists and elbows and fingers into her father’s blackened body.

She screamed!

“Dontcha dare, yugly sonuvabitch!” She roared, smiling as Uncle Remus groaned once again. Her large fists raised in the air triumphantly, on the precipice of striking another blow. Then they were tucked away. Uncle Remus’ head tilted back slowly. The old man parted his cracked lips for his own dark smile.

“Hey, Pumpkin.” The words drawled out of his mouth.

“Papa, tell me about the King’s festival!” Lilith implored, her voice deep just like always.

“Law, honey,” Uncle Remus replied, “ain’t I tell you bout dat many a time fore?”

Lilith just stared across at him with those big, grey eyes.

Uncle Remus closed his eyes as if to remember the story, as if he hadn't told this same tale many times before to Lilith.

"See I can't scarcely member..." He started. Lilith slapped his face hard, with her whole palm, then snapped her hand back under the folds of her dress, out of sight. She closed her eyes.

Uncle Remus continued, painting the animals in a line to present their talent. Brer Beetle's dung rolling stunts, Brer Rattlesnake's dulcet rhythms, Brer Terrapin's solemn dance.

Lilith always wondered how a beetle would do a circus show. The beetles she knew only crawled on her face at night and ate the things she cared about.

"Na the King wus not like the o'er anamuls. He wus bald, with no scales, feathas no' fur, and sat up on 'is aunches like a bear scratching 'is back on a tree. One pale head stood upright, while the other that sprouted from the same set of sholdas drooped over like a sunflowa at night.

'Brer Coyote,' he bellowed, raising 'is spindly fingers to beckin him over. 'What do you have to offer today?' The King axed 'im. 'I have yet to be impressed by any of these friv-o-lous performances thus far. All o' my hopes rest in you.'

Author Commentary

David Smith

I began writing this piece with the intention of reclaiming and subverting an important piece of my culture as a black American. As a child, my father would read to me the stories of Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit. These stories were written by Joel Chandler Harris, who appropriated them from the slaves on Turner Plantation where he worked. Despite Harris compiling them as a testament to the charms of slavery, they have endured as a symbol of African American culture. So I began with the internal story of mischievous animals, intending to position the storytelling as monstrous and modern. In order to mimic Harris' style, I paid careful attention to diction and meter. The source material was heavily racialized; the false dialect that Harris crafted was a symbol for blackness. I was driven by an investigation into the ways that word choice and sentence structure mediate this symbolism.

While outlining the story, I realized that there was another key element that I needed to mimic. This genre and structure of storytelling allowed me to write two parallel messages. Harris' writing is layered: There is an internal story of Brer Rabbit et al. and an external story of Uncle Remus and the little boy. The tales of the animals are primarily didactic, often carrying moral messaging about surviving as a slave. In contrast, the secondary story that Harris spins between Uncle Remus and the little boy is one of contentment in servitude. I wove a modern spin on the internal story in order to craft a moral message that resonated with today's readers. In the external story, I subverted Harris' style by turning comfort in servitude into horror and abjection. This genre is a versatile medium. Mimicking it allowed for depth in storytelling and symbolism.

Editor Commentary

Joe Himmelfarb

You may be surprised to find a creative piece published in *Tortoise*: a journal dedicated to academic writing. However, David's story exemplifies how the foundational elements of writing taught in Princeton's Writing Program (and writing programs all over) are essential to any form of composition. Whether we are looking at a research paper, lab report, speech, or work of fiction, the [writing lexicon](#) is still at play when we construct and read a piece of writing. In particular, *The Quarters* illustrates the role of **motive**, **methodology**, and even **conventions** in an unconventional genre.

Essentially, the **motive** refers to why someone is writing. In humanistic and scientific disciplines, the motive is usually some sort of puzzle in the primary data and or a disagreement/gap in the secondary literature. Motive typically occurs and stems across multiple layers – primary data, secondary sources, and a more global significance; *The Quarters* displays how motive can occur and converse across layers even in a fictional piece. At a more external and broader level, David's motive is to reclaim the writing of Joel Chandler Harris (which was taken from the stories of enslaved people). He does this by repurposing the tales of Brer Coyote and Uncle Remus. In this way, this broader motive emerges from multiple layers of motive within the text – a text that features a story-within-a-story. At the plot level, there are the questions of why Uncle Remus is telling a story (apparently because Lilith begs him) and the driving question of the inner story of Brer Coyote (who will win the King's festival). Ultimately, it is through the foundation of these plot motivations that David conveys his larger motive to re-tell these tales (1) in a non-racist context and eventually (2) transpose modern themes of environmental racism into the story.

Notably, these motives are deeply intertwined with David's **methodology**. To effect his reclamation of Harris' stories, the author needed to closely emulate the other author in terms of **conventions**: writing style, plot structure, characters, tone, and so forth. As he explained to me, the author gathered up various stories of Harris and figured out how to make modifications that excise the originally racist messages. This constitutes a delicate balancing act – knowing how much to keep and where to make changes – that David performs well. After reading *The Quarters*, I searched for Harris' writing to better understand this balancing act (reader's note: if

you are interested, there is [free online access](#) to Harris' 1881 story "Brer Rabbit and The Tar-Baby"). One of the ways you might see David subvert the conventions of Harris in this excerpt is when we see Lilith's rather violent outburst against Uncle Remus as he starts to fall asleep. Ultimately, David's motive is in some ways defined by his methodology, showing how lexicon elements can align to produce a coherent narrative. Though, in his narrative, David enters into conversation not just with another author but with deep legacies of history and enduring moral lessons.

Bios

David Smith '24 is concentrating in Social and Cultural Anthropology and pursuing a certificate in Arabic. He is from Castle Rock, Colorado, is a fencer on Princeton varsity and spends his free moments writing macabre stories and drawing. This story was written in a state of panic during his sophomore year.

Joe Himmelfarb, '24 is an English major. He is from Washington DC and enjoys reading and dabbling in creative writing. His current favorite books are *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin and *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck. He wrote this as a sophomore.