

Analyzing humor in middle passage



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Art of Humor in Charles Johnson's Middle Passage

Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* is a profoundly moving tale of one man's journey from bondage to freedom. Told through the eyes of Rutherford Calhoun, the newly freed slave, it's not surprising that these uniquely dramatic experiences of a misplaced freed slave in a white dominated world are often dispatched with some measure of humor. Rutherford himself is a carefree man with a propensity for life on the wild side. The reader is immediately introduced to Rutherford's sense of humor and unbridled spirit when he states that:

"Of all the things that drive men to sea, the most common disaster, I've come to learn, is women." (Johnson, p. 1)

Although Rutherford's statement is a bitter commentary on women, the manner in which he delivers it makes the statement palatable and could move even a female reader to laughter. The impression isn't that women as a whole are prone to disaster, but that Rutherford himself is unable to reconcile the responsibilities associated with relationships with his new found freedom. Later on, the reader learns that it is the idea of falling in love and losing his individuality that threatens Rutherford. He notes that:

"Did I love Isadora? Really, I couldn't say. I'd always felt people fell in love as they might fall into a hole; it was something I thought a smart man avoided." (Johnson, p. 7)

Despite this cynical view of love and relationships, Rutherford once again employs humor in such a way that even the greatest romantics might be compelled to laugh at themselves.

Johnson's portrayal of Rutherford conveys an uncanny ability to find humor in the most tragic of circumstances. What might otherwise be viewed as a lonely and sad scenario comes across as comedic yet melancholic. For

instance, Rutherford describes Isodara's loneliness and her penchant for nurturing together with her lack of beauty. He tells the reader that:

" No, she wasn't much to look at, nor was the hotel room where she lived with eight one-eyed cats, two three legged dogs, and birds with broken wings." (Johnson, p. 6)

Implicit in Rutherford's observation is a satire of a slave's journey from slavery to freedom. The reader appreciates that Rutherford's mind has also been freed. He is free to form his own opinions and he is free to go about his own business. With this freedom comes a lightness rather than resentment. Rutherford does not look back with ire instead he looks ahead with hope and anticipation. Everything about Rutherford is associated with a positive note and with this comes a measure of comedy where none would otherwise exist.

The humor is used by Johnson to exemplify anachronism. In other words it fills the gap between Rutherford's own situation and history and the current reader. In one scenario, Rutherford observes " his face looked, so help me, like five miles of bad Louisiana road". (Johnson, p. 54) In yet another scenario Rutherford makes light of racism via the use of anachronism by observing: "...the high-flown inscrutable way whites made the Cherokees talk in dime novels, or the Chinese in bad stage plays". (Johnson, p. 83)

Middle Passage delves generally in painful and strained circumstances but finds a way to add humor in a way that makes it more memorable.

Sources

Johnson, Charles. Middle Passage. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990