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Olaudah Equiano: The Middle Passage
Olaudah Equiano: The Middle Passage. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, gives a first-hand account of the capture of Africans, their shipment across the Atlantic and their transformation into slaves in America. Equiano belongs to a noble family in present-day Nigeria and is captured and sold into slavery as a little boy. On reaching the West coast of Africa, Equiano is sold to European slavers, who take him on board a slave ship and set out on the notorious Middle Passage: the journey across the Atlantic Ocean that brings enslaved Africans to North America. Olaudah Equiano gives a vivid description of the Middle Passage which demonstrates the terror of the prisoners, the abject conditions on board and the attitude of the slavers to their cargo.

The captured African slaves are absolutely terrified on their passage. The main reason for this fear is the ignorance of the Africans, as this is their first encounter with Europeans. Equiano's horror is "heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo" (Equiano, 1789). The fair complexion, long hair and alien language of the white men makes Equiano believe that they are "bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me" (Equiano, 1789). The large copper furnace and the dejected, fettered prisoners reinforce his fear of being sacrificed. Another factor which contributes to Equiano's fear is the water: "not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it" (Equiano, 1789). Most of the captured slaves are from interior Africa and have never seen the sea. The ship and its navigation seem magical to the Africans.

The conditions on board the slave ship are extremely miserable. The slaves are confined to the unventilated hold, where they are chained and packed tightly together. The initial cargo of slaves is supplemented by the additional

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slaves taken on at sea. This makes the hold “ so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself” (Equiano, 1789). Equiano paints “ a scene of horror almost inconceivable”: the heat, the toxic miasma of perspiration, the suffocating atmosphere, the increasing irritation of the chains, the groans of the dying, the shrieks of the women, the stench of humanity and the tubs of human excreta “ into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated” (Equiano, 1789). The stink of the holds is beyond tolerance. The pestilential air makes the slaves ill and even causes fatalities. The rations are insufficient to satisfy the slaves’ appetite. It is a mark of the slavers’ spite that they would rather throw their excess catch of fish overboard than give it to the famished Africans. Without a doubt, the slave ships are a living hell. The attitude of the slavers to their cargo is inhuman. It is clear that the captured Africans are not considered men but only as a valuable cargo. Equiano points to “ the improvident avarice” of the traders which makes them take on more cargo into a hold which is already filled to capacity. It is in the interest of the traders to ensure that the slaves eat in order to survive. This makes them severely punish any slave who refuses to eat. Equiano describes his treatment for not eating: one of the slavers “ held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely” (Equiano, 1789). It is the same self-interest which makes them severely punish any slave who attempts suicide. They even pretend to be friendly with the Africans in order to keep them calm: “ Several of the strangers also shook hands with us black people” (Equiano, 1789). The slavers are possessed only by the profit motive. Their brutality is such that it extends even to their own kind. Equiano tells of a sailor who is flogged to death and thrown overboard.

Olaudah Equiano's autobiographical account of the Middle Passage is a personal testimony to the horrors of the slave trade. The white slavers who run the slave ships are bestial in their cruelty. The passage makes it clear why Equiano's book made a significant contribution to the abolitionist cause and aroused anti-slavery feeling in the West.

References.

Equiano, Olaudah. (1789). *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. In Jerry H. Bentley & Herb Zeigler (Eds.), *Traditions & Encounters, Vol. B From 1000 to 1800, 5th Ed.* 2010, (pages of document).