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Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage":

Slavery Means Death for Slave and Slaver Alike

Robert Hayden's powerful poem "Middle Passage" (1945) is filled with images of violence and death. Clearly one of the poet's intentions is to illustrate the horror of the Middle Passage as it was experienced by Africans kidnapped from their homes and inhumane transported to distant lands, especially the United States. But Hayden also wants to make it clear that everyone associated with the institution suffered due to the sin of slavery—slave and slaver alike.

Hayden begins his poem with images of those who suffered most egregiously, the Africans who were stolen from their homes, some 50 to 60 million men, women, and children. The poet writes, "Sails flashing to the wind like weapons, / sharks following the moans the fever the dying; / horror the corposant and compass rose" (20). Later, via the voice of a slaver, Hayden describes some especially ghastly horrors suffered by blacks. The speaker relates an incident whereby some of the slaves who were "stowed spoon-fashion" like "cattle," eventually "went mad of thirst and tore their flesh / and sucked the blood" (21). In another incident aboard The Bella J, a fire breaks out and the speaker describes how "the negroes [were] howling and their chains / entangled with the flames" (21). Hayden also incorporates African-on-African violence, describing how one

chieftain would “send / his warriors to burn the sleeping villages / and kill the sick and old and lead the young / in coffles to our factories” (22).

But even the white and Hispanic slavers were victims of the violence they themselves precipitated. Because of the extremely unsanitary conditions in which the slaves were transported, disease would run rampant on the ships, sparing no one regardless of skin complexion. In particular, Hayden describes an outbreak of ophthalmia, an eye infection that led to blindness: “It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads, / Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.’s eyes / . . . the jungle hatred / crawling up on deck” (21; Hayden’s italics). The climax of Hayden’s poem deals with the slave revolt on The Amistad in which the Africans attacked their Cuban captors. In the voice of one of the Cuban survivors of the revolt, Hayden writes, “[T]hey had fallen on us with machete / and marlinspike . . . / Our loyal / Celstino ran from below with gun / and lantern and I saw, before the cane-knife’s / knife’s wounding flesh” (23). The survivor describes how his “butchered” comrades were thrown “overboard”—completing the cycle of images begun in the poem with the opening stanza’s reference to the sharks that followed the slaveships.

With his graphic imagery, Hayden makes it clear that no one escaped the horrors of slavery, not even the perpetrators of slavery themselves. Contemporary psychologists have speculated that American society is still suffering from the aftermath of slavery.

Work Cited

Hayden, Robert. "Middle Passage." *African American Literature*. Ed. Keith Gilyard, and Anissa Janine Wardi. New York: Pearson-Longman, 2004. 20-24. Print.