



## BACKGROUND

**Charles Johnson** (1948–), a writer, philosopher, artist, and educator, has often confronted the effects of race and racism. “Racism is based on our belief in a division between Self and Other, and our tendency to measure ourselves against others,” he says. “Sad to say, it is also based on fear.” Johnson’s work has earned a MacArthur fellowship, the National Book Award for Middle Passage (1990), and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award.



# A SOLDIER FOR THE CROWN

Short story by Charles Johnson

## SETTING A PURPOSE

As you read, pay attention to the way in which personal circumstance, social standing, and ideological differences affect the meaning of liberty.

- 1 **Y**OU ALWAYS WERE a gambler.
- 2 Before the war broke out, when you were still a servant in Master William Selby’s house, you’d bet on anything—how early spring thaw might come, or if your older brother Titus would beat your cousin Caesar in a wrestling match—and most of the time you won. There was something about gambling that you could not resist. There was suspense, the feeling that the future was not already written by white hands. Or finished. There was chance, the luck of the draw. In the roll of dice or a card game, there was always—what to call it?— an *openness*, a chance that the outcome would go this way or that. For or against you. Of course, in bondage to Master Selby there were no odds. Whichever way the dice fell or the cards came up, you began and ended your day a slave.
- 3 But did you win *this* time?
- 4 Standing by the wooden rail on a ship bound for Nova Scotia, crammed with strangers fleeing the collapse of their colonial world—women and children, whites and blacks, whose names

## Notice & Note

Use the side margins to notice and note signposts in the text.

## ANALYZE AND EVALUATE PLOT

**Annotate:** Identify statements in paragraph 2 that introduce suspense.

**Infer:** What do these statements make you wonder about what will happen next?



## NOTICE & NOTE

### ANALYZE LITERARY ELEMENTS

**Annotate:** Mark the phrase in paragraph 4 that reveals how the narrator thinks the main character feels.

**Draw Conclusions:** What effect does the second-person narration have?

### LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS

**Annotate:** Read the dialogue in paragraphs 6–12. Mark the contraction with a first-person pronoun. Mark the contraction with the second-person pronoun.

**Analyze:** How do you know the subjects and verbs agree? How do the person and number of each subject affect the verb?

appear in Brigadier General Samuel Birch's *Book of Negroes*—you pull a long-shanked pipe from your red-tinted coat, pack the bowl with tobacco, and strike a friction match against a nail in your bootheel. You know you are fortunate to be on board. Now that the Continental Army is victorious, blacks who fought for the crown are struggling desperately to leave on His Majesty's ships departing from New York harbor. Even as your boat eased away from the harbor, some leaped from the docks into the water, swimming toward the ship for this last chance to escape slavery. Seeing them, you'd thought, *That might have been me*. But it wasn't; you've always been lucky that way, at taking risks. Running away from bondage. Taking on new identities. Yet you wonder what to call yourself now. A loyalist? A traitor? A man without a country? As the harbor shrinks, growing fainter in the distance, severing you forever from this strange, newly formed nation called the United States, you haven't the slightest idea after years of war which of these names fits, or what the future holds, though on one matter you *are* clear:

5 From the start, you were fighting for no one but yourself.

6 The day after Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton promised liberty to all blacks deserting the rebel standard and willing to fight on the side of the British, you learned that Titus and Caesar were planning to flee. In the evening, on your way to the quarters after finishing your duties in the house, Titus stopped you outside the barn, and asked, "Can you go back to the kitchen and sneak out some provisions for us?" Naturally, you'd asked him what for, and he put his fingers to his lips, shushing you. They planned to steal two horses, he said. Then ride to safety behind British lines. "You're leaving?" You were almost speechless with anger. "And you're not taking *me*?"

7 "How can I?" he asked. "You're only fifteen."

8 "What's that got to do with anything? I can fight!"

9 "You ever fired a gun?"

10 "No, but I can learn!"

11 "Once I'm free, and got the papers to prove it, I'll come back."

12 "Titus, if you don't take me, I'll *tell*."

13 For a heartbeat or two, Titus looked as if he might hit *you*.

Grudgingly, he agreed to bring you along, despite your age and his declaration after your parents' deaths that he'd keep you from harm. You did as he requested, returning to the house and filling a sack with food, Master Selby's clothing, even some of the mistress's jewelry that the three of you might barter, then delivered all this to your brother and Caesar in the barn. The three of you left that night on two of the master's best horses, you riding behind Titus, your arms tightly circling his waist until you stopped to make camp in the woods. There, Caesar suggested that it would help if you all changed your names and appearances as much as possible since Master Selby was sure to post your descriptions. Titus said fine, he'd grow a beard and



call himself John Free. Caesar liked that, said, “Then I’ll be George Liberty.” They waited for you to pick a name, poking sticks at the campfire, sending up sparks into the starless sky. “Give me time,” you’d said, changing into buckskin breeches, blue stockings, and a checkered, woolen shirt. “I’ll shave my hair off, and I’ll think of something before we get there. I don’t want to rush.” What you didn’t tell them that night was how thrilling, how sweet this business of renaming oneself felt, and that you wanted to toy with a thousand possibilities—each name promising a new nature—turning them over on your tongue, and creating whole histories for each before settling, as you finally did, on “Alexander Freeman” as your new identity.

14 Thus, it was Alexander Freeman, George Liberty, and John Free who rode a few days later, bone weary from travel, into the British camp. You will never forget this sight: scores of black men in British uniforms, with the inscription LIBERTY TO SLAVES on their breasts, bearing arms so naturally one would have thought they were born with a rifle in their hands. Some were cleaning their weapons. Others marched. Still others were relaxing or stabbing their bayonets at sacks suspended from trees or performing any of the thousand chores that kept a regiment well-oiled and ready. When you signed on, the black soldier who wrote down your names didn’t question you, though he remarked he thought you didn’t look very strong. The three of you were put immediately to work. Harder work, you recall, than anything you’d known working in Master Selby’s house, but for the first time in fifteen years you fell to each task eagerly, gambling that the labor purchased a new lease on life.

15 Over the first months, then years of the seesawing war, you, Titus, and Caesar served His Majesty’s army in more **capacities** than you had fingers on the hand: as orderlies<sup>1</sup> to the white officers, laborers, cooks, foragers, and as foot soldiers who descended upon farms abandoned by their white owners, burning the enemy’s fortifications and plundering plantations for much-needed provisions; as spies slipping in and out of southern towns to gather information; and as caretakers to the dying when smallpox swept through your regiment, weakening and killing hundreds of men. Your brother among them. And it was then you nearly gave up the gamble. You wondered if it might not be best to take your chips off the table. And pray the promise of the Virginia Convention that black runaways to the British side would be pardoned was genuine. And slink back home, your hat in your hand, to Master Selby’s farm—if it was still there. Or perhaps you and Caesar might switch sides, deserting to the ranks of General Washington who, pressured for manpower, **belatedly** reversed his opposition to Negroes fighting in the Continental Army. And then there was that magnificent Declaration penned by Jefferson, proclaiming that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all

<sup>1</sup> **orderlies**: soldiers who provide assistance to and perform tasks for an officer.

### ANALYZE AND EVALUATE PLOT

**Annotate:** Mark the phrase in paragraph 13 that tells what Titus decided.

**Infer:** What questions from the beginning of this story are answered by his decision? What new question arises?

### capacity

(kə-pās’ĭ-tē) *n.* ability to hold or have something; function or role.

### belatedly

(bĭ-lā’tid-lē) *adv.* done too late or overdue.



## NOTICE & NOTE

### unalienable

(ün-äl'yə-nə-bəl) *adj.*  
impossible to be taken away.

### ANALYZE LITERARY ELEMENTS

**Annotate:** Mark details in paragraph 19 that refer to Alexander's feelings.

**Interpret:** What is the effect of the second-person point of view on your understanding of Alexander?

### elusive

(ī-lōō'siv) *adj.* difficult to define.

men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain **unalienable** Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," words you'd memorized after hearing them. If the Continentals won, would this brave, new republic be so bad?

16 "Alex, those are just *words*," said Caesar. "White folks' words for other white folks."

17 "But without us, the rebels would lose—"

18 "So would the redcoats. Both sides need us, but I don't trust neither one to play fair when this thing is over. They can do that Declaration over. Naw, the words I want to see are on a British pass with my name on it. I'm stayin' put 'til I *see that*."

19 Caesar never did. A month later your regiment was routed by the Continental Army. The rebels fired cannons for six hours, shelling the village your side occupied two days before. You found pieces of your cousin strewn everywhere. And you ran. Ran. You lived by your wits in the countryside, stealing what you needed to survive until you reached territory still in British hands, and again found yourself a pawn in the middle of other men's battles—Camden, where your side scattered poorly trained regulars led by General Gates, then liberated slaves who donned their masters' fancy clothing and powdered wigs and followed along behind Gates as his men pressed on; and the disastrous encounter at Guilford Court House, where six hundred redcoats died and Cornwallis was forced to fall back to Wilmington for supplies, then later abandon North Carolina altogether, moving on to Virginia. During your time as a soldier, you saw thousands sacrifice their lives, and no, it wasn't as if you came through with only a scratch. At Camden you took a ball in your right shoulder. Fragments remain there still, making it a little hard for you to sleep on that side or withstand the dull ache in your shoulder on days when the weather is damp. But, miraculously, as the war began to wind down, you were given the **elusive**, long-coveted British pass.

20 On the ship, now traveling north past Augusta, you knock your cold pipe against the railing, shaking dottle from its bowl, then reach into your coat for the scrap of paper that was so difficult to earn. Behind you, other refugees are bedding down for the night, covering themselves and their children with blankets. You wait until one of the hands on deck passes a few feet beyond where you stand, then you unfold the paper with fingers stiffened by the cold. In the yellowish glow of the ship's lantern, tracing the words with your forefinger, shaping your lips silently to form each syllable, you read:

This is to certify to whomfoever<sup>2</sup> it may concern, that the Bearer hereof . . . Alexander Freeman . . . a Negro, reforted to the Britifh Lines, in confequence of the Proclamations of Sir William Howe, and Sir Henry Clinton, late Commanders

<sup>2</sup> **whomfoever:** In the 1800s, handwritten and printed documents sometimes used the "long s," which looked like an *f* without the crossbar, in place of a lowercase *s*.



in Chief in America; and that the said Negro has hereby his Excellency Sir Benjamin Hampton's Permissiion to go to Nova Scotia, or wherever else he may think proper . . . By Order of Brigadier General Ruttledge

- 21 The document, dated April 1783, brings a broad smile to your lips. Once your ship lands, and you find a home, you will frame this precious deed of manumission.<sup>3</sup> At least in this sense, your gamble paid off. And for now you still prefer the adopted name Alexander Freeman to the one given you at birth—Dorothy.
- 22 Maybe you'll be Dorothy again, later in Nova Scotia. Of course, you'll keep the surname Freeman. And, Lord willing, when it's safe you will let your hair grow out again to its full length, wear dresses, and perhaps start a new family to replace the loved ones you lost during the war.

<sup>3</sup> **deed of manumission:** a document confirming a person's release from slavery.

### ANALYZE AND EVALUATE PLOT

**Annotate:** Mark the sentence in paragraph 21 that reveals a surprising truth about the main character.

**Infer:** Why doesn't the narrator name the main character until the end? What ambiguity about the situation remains?

### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer these questions before moving on to the **Analyze the Text** section.

- What is Dorothy doing when the story begins?
  - Sailing away from New York to freedom
  - Fleeing from Master Selby's farm
  - Running away from the army after a battle
  - Sailing with British troops for a new military campaign
- Which most likely explains why Titus resists taking Dorothy with him?
  - He does not take his promise to protect her seriously.
  - He does not want her to slow down their escape.
  - He does not think she will be safe because she is young and female.
  - He thinks she would be happier staying on Master Selby's farm.
- How does Dorothy gain the pass granting freedom?
  - She takes Caesar's pass after he was killed in battle.
  - She earns it through her service in the British army.
  - She has to buy the pass from a British soldier.
  - The British give passes to all African Americans.