

Pinktoes Short Guide

Pinktoes by Chester Himes

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Characters

In a satire, the characters usually lack the flexibility and individuality of characters in realistic fiction. They are not really "characters" at all, but satiric-comic devices representing values or patterns of behavior the author has singled out for attack. The satirist defines his position early in the novel, and then the characters serve to illustrate it, each one acting rigidly and too involved in his own frenzy to pause for self-analysis.

The characters in *Pinktoes* are very much in the tradition of farcical satire, which has always thrived on the humiliation of villains and fools. Himes's secondary characters are cartoon figures embodying various forms of lewdness and lust. There is Panama Paul, for example, who dreams he is in a heaven full of white angels, but is unable to fly because his testicles are weighted down with anvils. He is no more developed as a character than is Metro Gordey, a nymphomaniac married to a homosexual. Metro, a white woman, knits replicas of the private parts of all the black men she sleeps with and then wears a necklace of her souvenirs to Mamie's Masked Ball.

Even the protagonist, Mamie, is nothing more than a caricature intended for ridicule and disgrace. Himes defines her personality almost immediately and then has her act and react unchangingly according to her obsessions.

She is a vain woman who lives to see her picture in the social pages of the newspapers and to sleep with white men. Because she believes that no man loves a fat woman if he can find a thin one, she is constantly dieting, deviating now and then for binges of gorging and vomiting, and then returning to her dieting.

The imagery of *Pinktoes*, like the imagery of all but the mildest satire, is always denigratory, basing its character metaphors on the trivial and the ugly. Himes's physical descriptions of Mamie, who is forever either stuffing her fat face or engaging in bizarre sexual encounters with her aging white lovers, recall Jonathan Swift's detailed references in *Gulliver's Travels* to the repulsiveness of the Brobdingnagian women. As a character in a realistic novel, Mamie would be in outrageously bad taste, but as a caricature in a satire bordering on farce, she is well-suited to the author's purpose of ridiculing his victims.



Social Concerns/Themes

In all his writing, Himes is concerned with the daily realities, the pressures and humiliations, of being black in a racist society dominated by whites.

Although his work leaves little doubt as to whom the real enemy is, it also reveals the agonized awareness that blacks often do little to help their own cause, and thus remain the prisoners of their weaknesses and obsessions.

Himes expresses these concerns indirectly in his detective novels through the violent adventures of his two black detectives in Harlem. In *Pinktoes*, he reveals his vision of the black experience in America more directly, in a savagely funny satire of Harlem's black liberals.

Himes's protagonist is Mamie Mason, an upper-middle-class black woman who believes she is devoted to solving "the Negro problem." In reality, Mamie is totally preoccupied with sex, as are all the other characters. Her idea of helping her people is to invite wealthy blacks and whites to her drunken parties and then encourage them to pair off with each other. Although it is easy to understand how this type of novel could be mistaken for erotica or even pornography, *Pinktoes* is less erotic than a cage full of gerbils during mating season. Even a trace of erotica would defeat the author's purpose, which is to show the complete lack of real love and meaning in the lives of his characters.

The changing meaning of the word "faith" is central to the novel's message. In a prefatory chapter, the narrator explains that there is more faith in Harlem than anywhere else in the world, as shown by fat Mamie's brutal dieting and her determined pursuit of distinguished white guests for her parties and bedroom. However, it soon becomes clear that like all satirists, Himes assumes moral standards against which his characters' behavior is to be measured. Mamie's "faith" is actually a kind of despair, because it is faith in drinking, gluttony, and debauchery for their own sakes. At the novel's conclusion — a conclusion which concludes nothing — the characters are no better off than they were at the beginning. They are not wealthier or happier and they have in no way advanced the cause they babble about so idealistically. As a satire, *Pinktoes* is a cry of anger and disgust at the antics of some of the least sincere members of the Civil Rights movement.

Techniques

In order to satirize the black liberals of Harlem, Himes uses the persona of a detached journalist or social historian as his narrator. Often this narrator draws attention to himself as the author of what he describes as a journal or historical treatise. On other occasions he speaks directly to the reader, questioning the validity of his own anecdotes and warning against hasty conclusions. Once he pretends to be concerned for a character's reputation, and claims to have changed her name to save her embarrassment. All these methods of self-reference have the effect of breaking the illusion of reality by emphasizing that the story being told is only a story. They distance both the author and the reader from the characters, helping to prevent any real involvement with them. The characters are presented for ridicule and contempt, never for sympathy.

Literary Precedents

Pinktoes belongs to the long tradition of literary satire, which has included a remarkably wide range of writing, from the bitterly indignant anger of Juvenal in his great satires, to the urbane wit of Evelyn Waugh in his comic novels. Generally, whatever the target and tone of attack, satire has been justified by those who practice it as a corrective of human vice and folly; by drawing attention to human errors, the satirist hopes to eliminate them. Pinktoes, however, suggests little hope of redemptive change in the characters, as even three of the chapter titles indicate: "But Drunks Keep Right on Drinking," "She Keep Right On She-ing," and "Hes Keep Right On He-ing." Himes takes for granted a world permanently full of stupidities, follies, and crimes.

His cynical tone implies that if people cannot demonstrate even basic common sense, then there is little point in offering them higher standards of behavior.

In this respect, Pinktoes is similar in its assumptions and methods to those of the comedy of manners, as written during the English Restoration (1660-1700). This kind of drama deals with the sexual relations and intrigues of lazy, shallow, upper-class people who have an infinite amount of time to do nothing. Like Pinktoes, the Restoration comedy of manners is bawdy and cynical; also like Pinktoes, it relies for comic effect on witty dialogue and the stupidities of its characters, who always include jealous husbands, foppish dandies, and lascivious mistresses.

(Excellent examples are William Congreve's *The Way of the World* and William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*.)

This kind of satire ridicules the behavior of its victims, but it rarely leaves the reader with a sense that this behavior can be eliminated, or even modified.



Related Titles

As a sexual satire, *Pinktoes* is Himes's most atypical novel, being neither directly autobiographical like his early work, nor a crime novel like his detective fiction. Nevertheless, the protagonist, Mamie Mason, is a recurring character-type in Himes's writing, suggesting an obsessive concern. She appears in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1965) as Mrs. Mabel Hill, the voluptuous young widow. Like Mamie, Mabel is black, ambitious to get ahead, and desirous of white men, hating them at the same time because they frustrate her social ambitions and refuse to recognize her innate superiority over white women.

Himes presents this character-type with a mixture of fascination and contempt, as if understanding the strange allure the races have for each other, while despising them for it. His early writing treats this situation with the utmost seriousness. *Pinktoes* exaggerates it to the point of self-parody.



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