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Research Essay: English fiction literature

The literary classic of American fiction literature “Sonny Blues” was written by a black American writer James Baldwin was published in 1957. James, although spent most of his adult life abroad, never forgot his life as a black man in white America. Sonny Blues is also the story which sheds light on the struggles on the black community in America, even though its main theme is not racial in nature. This paper will aim to provide a deeper understanding to the listener and make them observe an idea which they have yet not observed in the plot of the story.

# The Initiation story of the narrator

The fictional story of Sunny Blues revolves around a young black musician named Sunny, who gets into bad company and due to his addiction to drugs, especially heroin, gets himself arrested. He has an elder brother, who is narrating the story. He is a teacher by profession and has not been in contact with his brother for a long time and that is why he discovers from a newspaper that his younger brother has been arrested on accounts of selling drugs. The story practically begins when the narrator realizes that the students in his class have the same opportunities in life as his brother and that every single one has the same chance of going to prison as his brother. Time passes on, and the narrator does not take time to meet his younger brother nor does he take time to write him any letters.

Afterwards, a very big incident in the life of the narrator takes place in which the narrator’s young daughter Grace accidently dies. This reminded the narrator about the reality of life and relationships and he decided to write a detailed letter to his brother about life and its happenings and the two brothers meet up afterwards. Both of them after meeting, talk about the good old days in which they all lived together.

The narrator, then thinks about everything that Sunny has gone through and gives a brief account of the fights that Sunny and their father had because they were so similar in their lifestyles. The narrator also recalled when at the funeral of their mother, they were talking and Sunny shared his dream of becoming a Jazz pianist which the narrator readily dismissed. The writer was slowly and steadily coming to the realization that he was the one who was responsible for the state of being that his younger brother was in right now. He realized that his brother was a good lad from the beginning of his life and that he needed a big brother to be there with him who wasn’t. He had a flashback in which their mother was telling him to take care of his younger brother and that their father had a very traumatizing experience with his brother and that they do not want them to have a similar experience. The traumatizing experience being that his brother was run over by a car full of white men which did not care to stop for the black man to cross the road. He also recalls the time in school when the narrator had joined the military and Sunny was living with his wife’s parents but it also was a difficult experience for them. Sunny, when he practiced his piano in the house of his brother’s wife, was not very welcomed. He also got himself into trouble when he skipped his school to spend time with other musicians. That was when he got into a small fight with the other residents of the house and got to know how big of a nuisance he had been for their family, and then due to this guilt, he joined the navy a couple of days later. Fast forward to the war in which the brothers did not know the whereabouts of each other and only came in touch with each other when the narrator was able to receive a letter of his brother from Greece. After the war, both brothers came to New York but lived separately and did not meet each other either. They eventually came into contact after some months but that meeting was not a very happy one. Sunny had made the decision of joining the navy without consulting his elder brother and the elder brother i.e. the narrator was cross about it. They fought about the life decisions made by Sunny on every single meeting, and it came to a point where they almost wowed to never talk to each other as brothers again by Sunny telling his brother that he is dead for him. The narrator moves away assuming that one day Sunny will come to him when he need help but he knows, from within, that Sunny is a grown-up now and it is very much possible for him to not need him at all. He is afraid of that reality as well. The narrator continues to feel the guilt of Sunny ending up in prison as he continues his efforts to grow closer to him. The story ends with the narrator and Sunny going to a jazz club in which Sunny was to perform and that is when the narrator realizes that he has never really tried to understand the life, feelings, and struggles of his younger brother and that he needs to work harder to understand the struggles of Sunny. Another piece of evidence that can be used for this idea is the fact that the narrator never really bothered to know the life and the happenings of Sunny’s life when he was living at the in-laws of the narrator, and the narrator was serving in the military. This story, in my opinion is an initiation story for the narrator as the narrator realizes his shortcomings towards his brother in the main flashback which takes most of the plot of the story. The world views of the narrator in the story are challenged when his brother performs on stage as the narrator always believed that he should have been the one making life decisions for his younger brother and their conversation at their brother’s death is an evidence of that. The narrator at that moment in time, thinks that he should not have shrugged the idea of becoming a jazz pianist off like that and that he should have been given a chance to pursue his dream (*“Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin — HCC Learning Web*).

An initiation story comprises of an idea where a young protagonist in the story experiences a significant change about his or her pre-conceived ideas. It should give some evidence, though that the changes experienced by the protagonist is somewhat permanent (Marcus). In the plot of the story described above, the narrator talks about the happenings around him. He discusses deeply about how he was given the responsibility of his younger brother by his family and what kind of a family they had growing up. He also discussed the race-based problems that they faced when the father of the narrator had their brother run over by a car in front of his own eyes by a group of white people who did not bother to stop seeing the black man in the middle of the road. The narrator, taking responsibility of the brother took his life decisions in his own hands. The opinion of the younger brother was not given a lot of weight when making life decisions concerning him. The younger brother was thus neglected and they therefore began to grow apart. The beliefs of the narrator were challenged on the day when both of them went to the jazz café to see his brother play the piano. The narrator then realized that it was all a mistake and that he needed to give his little brother a little bit of freedom. The life decisions concerning Sunny should also have been taken by him and that Sunny would also have been happier that way and in the end, that was what truly mattered. This realization would have changed the pre conceived beliefs of the narrator completely and had made him into a more balanced person. The narrator also realized from this experience, the true meaning of responsibility. The idea that you need to guide the person whom you are taking responsibility of but that does not amount to the fact that the elder person should begin imposing his or her own will on their subjects. There is a very fine line between being overly authoritative which in common terms is known as a “control freak” and being the mentor or leader who is followed when one is lost in the crosshairs of life. The narrator in the early part of the story also seems to be prejudiced against musicians, which in itself is not a good thing. I believe that in the end of the story, that prejudice is also broken and the narrator becomes a more level-headed and open-minded person. In my opinion, this is what makes this story an initiation story.

Works cited:

Marcus, Mordecai. “What Is an Initiation Story?” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1960, pp. 221–28. JSTOR, *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/428289.

*“Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin — HCC Learning Web*. https://learning.hccs.edu/faculty/selena.anderson/engl1302/readings/sonnys-blues-by-james-baldwin/view. Accessed 13 Dec. 2019.