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Sonny Blues by James Baldwin

 Sony Blues is a short story written by James Baldwin and was published twice in the history of African American Literature. It was first published in Partisan Review in 1957 and then became part of Baldwin’s book ‘*Going to Meet the Man*’ in 1965. James Baldwin was an African American prolific writer and social critic who suffered and struggled throughout his life and his experience of racism, segregation and music are the themes of this popular masterpiece short of Sony Blues. He was an important voice in African American literature during the time of the Black struggle and the civil rights era (journals). Through his stories, he managed to address the people of America about the unjust behavior and inequalities faced by African Americans. Thus, with respect to Baldwin’s identity as a black man, Sony Blues comes fairly under the category of African American literature. Although it is not overtly about racial discrimination, it gives a detailed description of the experiences of a black man especially in the Civil Rights era and tells a moving story that surrounds the theme of struggle as a black man. These themes run deeply in the lives of every Black American. It is seen as African American literature because of the different aspects that revolve around a Black man who lives in the alienated environment of America.

The characters of Sonny Blues experienced several misfortunes and alienation which represents real life Baldwin when he was in Harlem. Like the narrator of the story who is supposed to be the brother of the main character, Sonny Blues discusses darkness that is used throughout the story, as a threat to the African-American community. While teaching his students, he says that, “All they really knew were two darknesses; the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness”. His students as they grew older, realized that they are not a major part of the community and are worried about the opportunities. The narrator who laments about their future also is worried about his brother Sonny Blues who has become a drug addict and takes him home in Harlem. On their way, the narrator discusses their childhood by saying, “the vivid, killing streets of our childhood” and by this he meant that nothing has really changed since their childhood. This part of the story shows what Black Americans went through as minorities and shows the same lifestyle without any progress. This shows their segregation or alienation for being Blacks as white people never seemed to care about their needs (Francis). He further describes the pain of racism by saying, “these boys, now, we're living as we'd been living then; they were growing up with rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities”. The narrator is guilty about the lack of compassion or love he has been showing towards his brother Sonny Blues which made him a drug addict. He feels guilty of not being able to take care of his brother after his parent’s death because he knew how much his mother loved him and he was called ‘the apple of his father’s eyes’. After the death of the narrator’s own daughter, he was able to understand the sufferings of Sonny Blues and finally thinks of his brother’s experience which represents the pain of the whole community. Suffering is an important element in Sonny Blues as it helps in bonding families in the African American community and in the story helped the narrator to reunite with his brother. For instance, the narrator says, “Yet when he smiled, when we shook hands, the baby brother I’d never known looked out from the depths of his private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light”.

 After living as a family, the narrator than shares the story of his uncle who was killed by a car full of drunk white men which indirectly describes the evil attitude of white people towards the black community. As in the story, his mother says, “I ain’t telling you all this, she said, to make you scared or bitter to make you hate nobody. I am telling you this because you got a brother and the world ain’t changed”. This piece of writing is related to African American literature because of the elements of music it has, especially Jazz music which is an African musical form. In the story, Sonny Blues is inclined towards playing jazz music which allows him to discover himself and his heritage. Music reconnects him with his community and it also diminishes the feelings of alienation and he not only invokes his heritage but also compels his brother to understand what he has been through as a child and later as an adult. Music worked as a catalyst of change for Sonny as it stopped him from drug abuse and made his relationship strong with brother. The narrator too accepts his brother as a musician and is happy to see him as a strong man who dealt so much in his life (“Sonny’s Blues by James Baldwin”).

James Baldwin clears everything through this story and through his writing he accomplishes many things. Sonny Blues does not only serve as fiction that talks about African Americans in Harlem but also tells the struggles faced in a relationship.

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