Exchange Value Essay, Research Paper

Money is Power in “Exchange Value” by Charles Johnson

Author Charles Johnson provides us with a brief look into human nature and the profound affect money has on people in his short story “Exchange Value”.

The plot of the story is simple a basic rags to riches story with a 1990s twist. It centers around two brothers who live in a poverty ridden apartment. These brothers, Loftis and Cooter decided to break into an old eccentric woman’s’ apartment. She has lived down the hall from them their entire lives and when they do not see her begging for food on a daily basis as she normally would, they correctly deduce that perhaps she may have died. After gaining entry into her filthy, smelly, booby trapped apartment they see all the riches she had hoarded. The brothers feel like they are in Aladdin’s cave. They find various strange items, as the younger brother Cooter describes,

” But her living room, webbed in dust , be filled to the max with dollars of all denominations, stacks of stock,

General Motors, Gulf Oil, and 3m Company in old White Owl cigar boxes, battered purses, or bound in pink rubber bands. It be like the kind of cubby hole kids play in, but filled with ? things : everything, like a world inside the world, you take it from me, so like a picture book scenes of plentifullness you could seal yourself off in here and settle forever…. There be unopened cases of Jack Daniel’s, three safes cemented

to the floor, hundreds of matchbooks, unworn clothes, a fuel burning stove, dozens of wedding rings, rubbish, World War II magazines, a carton of a hundred canned sardines, mink stoles, old rags, a birdcage, a bucket of silver dollars, thousands of books, paintings, quarters in tobacco cans, two pianos, glass jars of pennies, a set of bagpipes, an almost complete Model A Ford dappled with rust and I swear three sections of a dead tree” (524).

The brothers then proceed to transfer the wealth, or steal it all and place it all in their apartment. They inventory the treasures prior to stealing it and we are told the total of all the possessions is $879,543.00. The total theft equals almost one million dollars and they marvel at their “big score”. This begins the thought processes for the brothers on how they will handle the this unexpected windfall. The elder brother Loftis is thought to be the smarter of the pair but in the story it is revealed that in fact the lazy, drug using but caring younger brother Cooter is the one who realizes the dilemma that these two have gotten themselves into with this huge amount of wealth. They figure they are set for life as Cooter says,

” Be like Miss Bailey’s stuff is raw energy, and Loftis and me like wizards, could transform her stuff into anything else at will. All we had to do, it seemed to me, was decide exactly what to exchange it for” (526).

The brothers struggle in finding this “exchange value” and in their stuggle the older brother thought to be the smarter of the two undergoes a transformation where he comes to the realization that money is power and mistakenly he decides to hold on to the power rather that enrich his life by spending the money.

Money is power, that thought is thrust upon Americans from the beginning of our formative years till the day we die. We are told to save for a rainy day as young children and later we are told to save for our children’s inheritance after we die. We go to extraordinary lengths to protect out wealth just as the character Miss. Bailey does in the story. Cooter explains,

” There was some kind of boobytrap-boxes of broken glass-that shoulda warned us Miss Bailey wasn’t the easy mark we made her to be”(524). All of the characters in the story, behave exactly as some real people when they fail to see the enjoyment and comfort the money could provide if they were to spend it. Recently I was introduced to a lottery winner of twenty-two million dollars who continued to keep her same nursing job. This woman’s life paralleled the life of the story, she was afraid to spend the money for fear of giving up the power of having it. She continued to work at her same job on the graveyard shift, no less, rather than retire and live off her great fortune. This is the same fate that happens to the characters in the story. Rather than escaping the poverty and using the money which was an inheritance left to Miss Bailey, they become mired in the decision making process and end up living exactly as she did.

The author makes use of diction to express many different observations about the characters in the story. The story is written in colloquial diction using common black slang to help create the feelings. This use of slang makes it somewhat difficult for the reader to understand and demands that the reader use critical reading skills to be able to interupt the story. There were a few sentences that I did not understand including the scene when the younger brother Cooter states, “Loftis and me Got Ovuh” but I was able to decipher that that the character was exclaiming his happiness over the newfound wealth (526).

This story was rich in symbolism and imagery and it proved very descriptive in this manner. The author used quite a few different images to describe the characters. He called the old lady in the story, Miss Bailey, “A hincty halfbald West Indian woman with a craglike face?”(524). His use of descriptive language is very pronounced when he does on to describe the death scene when the two brothers come across the old woman dead in her bed. “Miss Bailey”, he wrote, “be in her long sleeve flannel nightgown, bloated, like she’d been blown up by a bicycle pump, her old face caved in with rot, flyblown, her fingers big and colored like spoiled bananas”(525).

The characters in the story end up adopting the old woman’s ways, even though in the beginning of the story it is the furthest thing from their minds. The irony of the story is not lost on the readers when in the final paragraphs Cooter the younger brother whispers a prayer to himself when he states, “Hold tight, it’s all right. Me, I wanted to tell Loftis how Miss Bailey looked four days ago, that maybe it didn’t have to be like that for us-did it?-because we could change”(528). While attempting to change they fall deeper and deeper into the pit of despair that they are so desperately trying to escape from through any means necessary. The story had a moral message, and that message was; be careful what you wish for, it just might come true.