Poe Essay, Research Paper

Yury Airapetian

Student ID: 9833967

English 103: Themes in Literature

Poverty in “Everyday Use”, “Sonny’s Blues” and “The Cathedral”

Comparing “Everyday Use”, “Sonny’s Blues” and “The Cathedral”, one can conclude that they share a common meaning. Although all three stories consider poverty as their theme, each chooses to elaborate it in a different manner. In fact, “Everyday Use” emphasizes on the state of extreme poverty in which certain people live. On the other hand, ”Sonny’s Blues” contributes to the theme by describing the poverty of spirit of Harlem’s “inner kids”. Carver’s “The Cathedral”, however, prefers to explore the notion of poverty as a state of one’s mind rather than the environment in which one lives.

In “Everyday Use”, Alice Walker chooses to develop the idea of poverty by focusing exclusively on the environment in which her protagonists live. Setting attributes, such as the ones used to describe the house in which the protagonists reside, enables us to better understand the theme. In fact, the dwelling does not even have any real windows. Instead, it has holes cut in the sides, like the portholes of a ship, but not round and not square, with rawhide holding the shutters up on the outside. Then, Walker proceeds with inside description of the house as she points out that the protagonists use benches for their table instead of chairs because they cannot financially afford any. Further, the author supports the theme by providing us with some physical description of specific objects. The use of quilts that “Grandma Dee” sewed from the scraps of her dress and the churn that Uncle Henry whittled from the wood is not derived from the protagonists’ intention to preserve “family values” but rather from a necessity to “survive”.

In “Sonny’s Blues”, the theme of poverty is characterized by the poverty of Harlem youth’s spirit. The author points out that there is no bright future for the Harlem kids. In fact, these boys grow rushingly until they reach the height where they could no longer grow because their heads “abruptly bump against”(5) the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. These boys see no sense for their life, as there is nothing that can motivate them to study and believe that they will actually succeed:

They were filled with rage. 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 and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together than they were at any other time, and more alone (5)

Instead, their poverty of spirit transforms them into isolated, ”fierce animals” that are filled with extreme rage towards others. They no longer look like other kids, as even their laugher bears no joy but is mocking and insular, and intends to denigrate others. Furthermore, the author questions the usefulness of teaching to these “spiritually poor boys”. Since their futures are so hopeless, there is little benefit of teaching to them. In fact, there is no purpose for the narrator “talking about algebra to kids that may all popping off needles every time they went to the head. Maybe it did more for them than the algebra could.”(4)

In “the Cathedral”, Carver chooses to explore a completely different aspect of poverty. Contrary to “Everyday Use” and “Sonny’s Blues”, Carver interprets the notion of poverty as a state of one’s mind. In fact, Bub reveals his narrow-minded personality after he shares with us his thoughts regarding blind people. Bub’s only idea of blindness came from movies. In cinemas, Bub noticed that the blind usually move slowly and never laugh. Sometimes, they are led by a seeing-eye dog. By describing Bub’s only idea of blindness, the author shows that Bub is an uneducated and primitive individual. Consequently, it leads Bub to a prejudice towards the blind, as he concludes that a blind man in his house is not something he looks forward to. In addition, the poverty of Bub’s mind transforms him into a stereotyped individual which results in his unwillingness to understand Robert’s life: “They’d married, lived and worked together, slept together…All this without having even seen what the goddamn woman looked like. It was beyond my understanding…and then I found myself thinking what a pitiful life this woman must have led”(16). It is impossible for Bub to understand Robert’s happiness with Beulah because it is different from the happiness that he has with his own wife.

The notion of poverty has a very expanded meaning. Although all three stories use poverty as their theme, each interprets it differently. Consequently, it does not necessarily mean the state of extreme misery that has been described in “Everyday Use”. As Carver points out, poverty may refer to poverty of one’s mind, which is caused primarily by the lack of education and stereotyped personality. Finally, poverty may reflect the hopelessness of one’s mind. Realizing that no bright future awaits them, Harlem kids find no sense in their lives. Unfortunately, the satisfaction of realizing their full potential does not derive from achieving standards that are unachievable by others. Instead, it arises uniquely from denigrating others, as the only way to be higher than someone is to put this person lower than you.