

Metaphorical light and darkness: a study of two literary works essay



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Light and darkness play vital roles in both James Joyce's "Araby" and James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues". However, if the light and darkness in "Araby" is religious in nature, with nuances of romance, "Sonny's Blues" explores light and darkness in terms of a struggle that may ultimately destroy or revive one person's life. Light and darkness in both stories are metaphors for the principal themes, like growing up, love and the struggle between good and evil. Light and darkness are used to symbolize good and evil.

When alone, the boy from "Araby" wallows in a state of darkness. One rainy night, he is alone and trying to control an urge that overwhelms him; he makes himself believe that it is religious fervor and not temptation: "It was a dark rainy evening and there was no sound in the house...Some distant lamp or lighted window gleamed below me... All my senses seemed to desire to veil themselves and, feeling that I was about to slip from them, I pressed the palms of my hands together until they trembled, murmuring: "O love! O love!" many times" (Joyce 405).

However, the boy puts the object of his affection on a pedestal of saintly perfection: "The light from the lamp opposite our door caught the white curve of her neck, lit up her hair that rested there and, falling, lit up the hand upon the railing" (Joyce 405). On the other hand, "Sonny's Blues" focuses on Sonny's more explicit light-and-darkness struggle. Sonny's "descent through drugs" is his personal darkness, while "his resurrection through jazz" has become his light (Ognibene 36). Light and darkness are used to define the mood of the two stories.

Near the beginning of “Sonny’s Blues”, the narrator “stared at [a newspaper] in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces, and bodies of the people, and in [his] own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside” (Baldwin 37). This happens when the narrator finds out that his brother has been arrested because of drugs. This is in the presence of “swinging lights” which add to the confusion of the moment instead of providing enlightenment to the narrator. He feels the darkness in Sonny, and in other young boys hooked on drugs, during that moment when he feels “trapped in darkness”.

Near the end of the story the mood is hopeful: the narrator thinks that “There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness” (Baldwin 60), when Sonny is reunited with his piano, and with jazz music. Meanwhile, “Araby” reflects the boy’s isolation when it begins with dreary words like “musty”, “useless” and “waste”. The boy’s neighborhood has drab, brown-colored houses (Joyce 404), and the priest, who is a former tenant in the boy’s house, has recently died. Light and darkness become metaphors for growing up joys and pains.

Though he experiences isolation, the boy from “Araby” also experiences first love. Even in his bleak surroundings, he recognizes that Mangan’s sister is part of the light that represents his dreams and idealism. The darkness represents the boy’s confusion at a time of growing up and experiencing disappointments. Growing up in Harlem has also been difficult for Sonny, but it is not love for a person that brings him light; it is the love for music. His quest for identity has many obstacles in Harlem; this includes drugs which put him in a state of darkness.

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Going back to something he loves to do - playing the piano - brings him back to sobriety and into the light. Sonny has grown up and learned through his own experiences. Both "Araby" and "Sonny's Blues" explore themes that are expressed through the use of light and darkness as symbols. Both Sonny and the boy from "Araby" experience darkness in growing up and know the continuous fight between good and evil in people, especially those who are still finding their own identities. While life disappoints the boy from "Araby", Sonny is struggling not to disappoint himself, and others.