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Winter in the Blood

In the novel, *Winter in the Blood*, the main character is a Native American boy (almost twenty years old) who lives with his mother, grandmother and a woman thought to be his wife.

He's going through an identity crisis, and our first clue is found in the title of the book. He feels isolated in a country that took over the Indian land and brought destruction and alcoholism to his people:

The country had created a distance as deep as it was empty, and the people accepted and treated each other with distance.

But the distance I felt came not from a country of people, it came from within me. It was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon. And that was why I had no particular feeling toward my mother and grandmother. Or the girl who had come to live with me. (2)

The author purposely “forgets” to tell us his name from the beginning of the book, so the reader can sense that the character is “lost” in his own self-destructive behavior—without a defined

identity. He lives in the past, haunted by the memories of his dead father and of an older brother, also dead.

The story is told in the first person, so the reader can have a better understanding of the main character's feelings, his struggle against emptiness and his search for an identity.

The new factory in town brought pollution, and as a result all the fish died; and so did the fishing. The situation only made things worse for the main character as "the Indians put away their new fishing poles" (6). He was, after all, an Indian from the Montana Blackfeet Reservation and by not being able to fish, he is torn between forgetting one of the activities of the old ways, and forgetting his heritage. His identity crisis will only deepen.

When his father died, frozen in the snow and stinking of beer, he didn't seem affected by his father's death. "I didn't know the man who froze in the borrow pit. Maybe that's why I felt nothing until after his funeral."

After his father's death, he would always wonder why his father was gone most of the time. But after a discussion with his mother who will reproach him that he is too sensitive about being an Indian, he realizes that his mother never understood his father either. Maybe that's why his father preferred to go into town and make the white men laugh. "Despite their mocking way, they respected his ability to fix things. They gave him more than his wife" (21). He knew that the only reason his father stayed with his mother was because of them—his children whom he loved very much.

The present doesn't hold too much interest for the main character, his memories seem more real than the real life.

His so-called wife left him a while ago, so he decided to go and bring her back. However, his grandmother disagreed, because she didn't like Crees. According to her, "Crees were good only for the white men who came to slaughter Indians" (33). Because of her feelings towards Crees, she "plotted ways to kill the girl" (33)—but only in her mind. When she was young, her father gave her to Standing Bear for two ponies and some robes for the young girl. She was sold cheap, because her father had already given away four daughters. She became Standing Bear's third wife, one of her sisters being his second wife. She loved her husband, but now she was just an old woman, who liked to control her grandson's life.

Despite his grandmother's feelings towards his "wife," he will still go after her at Malta—but he didn't find her there. He went to search for her in Havre. While there, he got involved with a man wanted by the FBI. He would have to drive him to Canada. When he was about to leave Havre, he saw the girl he was looking for. He wanted to talk to her; but he didn't. "There were people counting on me to make her suffer a little. Afterwards, I could buy her a drink" (102). He didn't find the courage to look for her again.

While wandering on the streets, he remembered twenty years ago when he was a kid, his brother, Mose, was at his side. Those were the happy times. Their father, First Raise, was still around, and they felt loved and protected. But the memories vanished away, and he met the

girl he came to look for. They finally talked. He admitted to her that he wasn't happy; but that didn't surprise the girl. He saw in her black eyes the reason he had brought her home that time before. "[Her eyes] held the promise of warm things, of a spirit that went beyond her miserable life of drinking..." (113). But she didn't come back with him, and her brothers would beat him up.

The man wanted by the FBI got arrested, and our main character consoles himself, spending the night with a strange woman. He had enough of Havre, strange people and himself. "He wanted to lose himself, to ditch the clothes, to outrun the burning sun, to stand beneath the clouds and have his shadow erased, himself along with it" (125).

He returned home to find out that his grandmother had died. The memories of his brother kept coming back, interrupting the continuity of his existence.

After his grandmother's death something started to change within him. "For the first time, he was able to look at the room without feeling that he was invading his grandmother's privacy" (131). For the first time, he seemed to be able to forgive himself about his brother's death; and for the first time, he would discover who his real grandfather was.

One day, he was about to die, stuck in the mud while trying to save a cow. When he finally made it out, he "spent the next few minutes planning his new life" (169). "Finally, I was able to push myself from the ground and stand on my own leg...Some people, I thought, will never

know how pleasant it is to be able to be distant in a clean rain, the driving rain of a summer storm” (170-172).

For the first time in years, he feels at peace with himself, looking forward to the future: his nightmares are over, his identity found and the present holds his future—not his past.

Works Cited

Welch, James. *Winter in the Blood*. New York: Penguin Group, 1986. 2-172