

2004

Blankets

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Pamela J, Olúbùnmi. "Blankets," by Alex La Guma. *Masterplots II: The Short Story*. Pasadena: Salem, 2004. 407-409.

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BLANKETS

Author: Alex La Guma (1925-1985)

Type of plot: Social realism

Time of plot: The 1950's and 1960's

Locale: A shantytown in Cape Town, South Africa

First published: 1964

Principal characters:

CHOKER, a tough, angry black man

HIS WOMAN FRIEND, who is estranged from the father of her baby

The Story

"Blankets" is told in the third person, interspersed with dialogue and the main character's thoughts. The main action takes place in a tiny, stifling bedroom and in the walled-in yard of one of the "box-board-and-tin shanties" of a suburban slum. Like most of Alex La Guma's short stories and novels, "Blankets" records events that deal with apartheid in South Africa.

The story begins when Choker wakes up irritated in the hot, stifling bedroom of a woman friend with whom he has just spent the night. Feeling ill and angry because of the room's oppressive heat and the unpleasant odors of the filthy blanket and sagging, smelly mattress on the old, drooping, wobbly bed, he curses irritably at everyone and everything: his sweaty, half-asleep woman friend, the wailing baby in the tin-bathtub crib who has been awakened by the "agonized sounds of the bed-spring," and the woman friend's estranged but jealous and protective lover. Tired of listening to the unrelenting "blerry noise" of the "damn kid," Choker walks out in a huff, but not before the woman warns that her estranged lover and father of her baby, who is quite displeased with Choker's visits, is likely to harm him. Dismissing her warning offhandedly and, true to his tough-man reputation, threatening to "break him in two" with his "thick, ropy, grimed hands," which he uses for "hurting rather than for working," Choker leaves the hot, humid room, scowling irritably as he heads past other equally oppressive rooms in the shanty slum to the tap outside to assuage his parched throat and cool off his face.

After Choker passes a walled-in garden, three men accost him and viciously stab him, leaving him helpless and bleeding profusely by the roadway, cursing. A crowd soon gathers, some wanting to help despite his reputation for brutality and viciousness and others wanting nothing to do with him. The helpful group prevails and carries him, under a torrent of curses, to a dusty, smelly backyard lean-to nearby to await the arrival of an ambulance. The rescuers make no bones about how much Choker deserved what happened to him even though Choker criticizes the "baskets" for doing a less than "decent job" of stabbing him. With the pain searing through his entire body, he fingers "the parched field" of a threadbare, smelly blanket someone has thrown

over him. He drifts in and out of consciousness, recalling his many encounters with filthy, smelly blankets, which have come to symbolize the decay and despair of his slum life. Drifting from the blanket experience of prison to one when he was six years old, he drifts back to the blanket experience that he had in the woman's bed moments before the attack. Before the ambulance arrives, there are some light-hearted moments in the bantering of the crowd in spite of the grimness of the slum life. The ambulance finally arrives, sirens screaming like the "high-pitched metallic wailing" of the "damn kid," and bears Choker away, strapped to a stretcher and covered with a sheet as "white as cocaine" and a blanket "thick and new and warm."

Themes and Meanings

Like the majority of La Guma's short stories and novels, "Blankets" deals with the decay and despair of slum life and the squalor, isolation, disconnectedness, and loneliness of repressed people under South African apartheid. It is about hope and hopelessness, poverty, violence, entrapment, love, and hate. Like the other stories in *A Walk in the Night* (1964), "Blankets" is about "actual characters" and "actual events" observed and recorded with the precision of an eyewitness. It is also a symbolic tale that focuses on the various blankets under which Choker has been forced to sleep, all the blankets of his harried, slum-dwelling life from which there appears to be no escape.

It is ironic that Choker's discomfort and anger does not stem from the stifling feeling of his lover's hot and humid room but from his lover's "unwashed, worn blanket," a symbol of all the squalidness of his life and his feeling of being trapped. Thus, the threadbare, vermin-infested blankets of childhood and manhood represent the several levels of despair that trap him in his own misery and in his inability to react and change things. The blanket, which should function as the protective cover it is meant to be, becomes instead a smothering, stifling coverlet that gives Choker neither comfort and protection from the cold during his childhood nor the much-needed succor he seeks in his adulthood. Instead, the blanket becomes the ever-present symbol of his exposure to the inimical forces of nature and his community. Although Choker can thrust the momentary confinement of the smelly bedding from himself, he merely has to turn around moments later to encounter it in different circumstances in what appears to be unaltered, or in some cases, worse forms. Thus, the many different blankets represent the tension between the basic human rights he is denied by the apartheid system and the social responsibility of the community to meet and defeat the evil forces of the repressive racism that is responsible for the despair in the first place.

Style and Technique

Critic Ben Lindfors has stated that La Guma's works are characterized by a skillful creation of atmosphere and mood, colorful dialogue, a mixture of pathos and humor, and occasional surprise endings. La Guma is known for his ability to portray character and for his keen, reportorial eye for detail, which he conveys with poignancy and meticulousness. His main character, Choker—appropriately named to reflect both his

own personal experience as a victim of poverty and oppression and a victimizer of fellow slum dwellers—is described as “a drifting hulk, an accursed ship moving through a rotting Sargasso.” In other words, he is a man who must respond with brutality and viciousness in order to survive the environment of slum life. La Guma describes the sounds and smells of the slum in language that is at once sparse but graphic: The woman’s bed and blankets are described as smelling of “cheap perfume, spilled powder, urine, and chicken droppings.” By choosing blankets as the metaphor of entrapment, La Guma is able to convey the squalid living conditions under which disadvantaged South Africans live during apartheid.

Everything about internal and external spaces and objects is fraught with tension: the breeze is hot, the light is “slum-coloured,” the baby’s cry is a “high-pitched metallic wail,” the bed springs make “agonized sounds,” the houses are old and crammed, and the shanties are cardboard and tin, the blankets are “exhausted” and a “parched field,” and the bedstead of his childhood is “narrow, cramped,” and “sagging.” If anything is humorous in “Blankets,” it is the light-heartedness of the dialogue among the slum dwellers and the pathetic bravado Choker exhibits even as he lies helplessly on blood-soaked layers of old newspapers in a lean-to that reeks of “dust and chicken droppings.”

La Guma’s use of flashbacks to tie Choker’s childhood experiences with blankets to his more recent adult experience with his lover’s blanket gives a circular shape to the narration. It is ironic that at the end, Choker does get a “thick and new and warm” blanket, granting his adult wish for “fresh-laundered bedding,” as he lies, perhaps on his last breath, in the ambulance. This may be an example of one of La Guma’s surprise endings, or perhaps this is how the writer infused the element of hope in seeming hopelessness.

Pamela J. Olubunmi Smith