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Marie Freudenburg

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THE POWER OF THE BLUES: A RESPONSE TO BALDWIN'S "SONNY'S BLUES"

by Marie Freudenburg

Life in Harlem gives a person more than his fair share of troubles. Sonny finds this fact out for himself; he strays away from his music and becomes addicted to heroin. In the end, his music saves him; he is forgiven and starts again with a clean slate. He finds truth and beauty in the dialogue of the band members, and hopes his audience will hear that conversation. In his blues he wraps the story of his culture, a point of unity for his listeners. Sonny's music touches his brother, the narrator, especially. Their relationship is reborn, just like Sonny is redeemed. With his blues, he saves himself, his relationship to his brother, and those who truly listen.

From the very beginning of the story, Sonny and his brother have a troubled relationship. Guilt and unsatisfied expectations make up the majority of their dealings with each other. From the older brother's perspective, Sonny cannot handle responsibility. From Sonny's viewpoint, his brother does not understand him. He states, "You got to find a way to listen" (Baldwin 857). They face this tension and disappointment head on when the older brother hears Sonny play the blues. In this scene, Sonny becomes the more important individual, and the big brother gets a chance to step back and listen. The narrator states, "Here, I was in Sonny's world."

Or rather: his kingdom” (860). He comes to appreciate Sonny’s talent, and realizes how big a part music plays in his life. Baldwin writes, “Sonny was part of the family again,” (862) and thus with Sonny’s music, their relationship becomes much healthier, and they begin to understand one another.

However, the music speaks to more than just the brothers’ relationship; the music tells Sonny’s story. Sonny has strayed down non-musical paths for too long. Baldwin writes, “Sonny hadn’t been near a piano for over a year. And he wasn’t on much better terms with his life” (861). Now, he comes back like a prodigal son. Baldwin shows Sonny being forgiven, reborn, and redeemed, all in one musical passage. The first image he creates tells of Sonny’s baptism. He writes, “He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for deep water” (861). This imagery of water speaks to the water of baptism, and thus Baldwin indicates that Sonny has been forgiven. Next, readers see Sonny reborn; the author states, “He seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano” (862). It seems as though Sonny starts afresh. Thus Baldwin ends Sonny’s story on a note of hope. He writes, “For me, then, as they began to play again, [the drink] shook above my brother’s head like the very cup of trembling” (864). This is a biblical reference to the story in which the Hebrews sin and receive punishment but then God forgives them and turns that “cup of trembling,” or fear, to their enemies. Baldwin uses this image to show that although Sonny has strayed in the past, he is forgiven, and can begin again. We see Sonny separate himself from the fear and trembling; it no longer drives him.

Sonny’s music helps him triumph over his troubles; his music, however, affects more than just himself. In jazz improvisation, members of the band must listen to each other, and feed off one another’s ideas. Baldwin writes, “The dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums, Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted...and Creole listened, commenting now and then” (862). This conversation makes the band so influential to Sonny, for here he finds thoughts to listen to and listeners for his own creativity. Baldwin uses this imagery to show readers how we must listen to others, and how we are defined by others; Sonny could not play alone and create such music. It takes more than going solo.

But Sonny’s blues stretches even further than that. In it, he incorporates his history. Baldwin writes, “Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back... He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy” (863). This story is his to tell, for it makes up his culture. Baldwin states:

They were playing the blues... They were not about anything very new. [Creole] and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin,

destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness. (862)

The blues, Baldwin believes, represents this story, this light in all the darkness. He uses the phrase, "light from the bandstand," (86) to show how music forms a voice to tell not only of Sonny's story, but of his culture's tale as well. That light provides common ground for those in the darkness of poverty, drug abuse, and sorrow in Harlem. Their history brings them together, and in that unity they can overcome their suffering and transform it into their strength. We see that unity in Creole, a term for a hybrid of a French and black American. This mix of heritage gives the hope that in the future, cultural differences can be overcome; sorrows of the past can be unified to create something new and beautiful. That triumph, that understanding, is what Sonny's music strives for. The narrator states, "We could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, and he would never be free until we did" (Baldwin 863). The band's dialogue of music embodies this listening and understanding. They set the example for others to follow.

The blues affects everyone in *Sonny's Blues*. It reaches to Sonny because it allows him a form of expression in which he is reborn. The music has meaning with the narrator, while it brings to light Sonny's talent, and helps bridge the chasm in their relationship. To Sonny's culture, his music gives a voice to the past, and with that, an understanding of one another. His listeners as well as readers find that with this understanding comes freedom, a unity in which fear has no part, where hope and strength for the future lies.

The page features decorative graphics: a large, light gray gear on the left side, a smaller white gear on the right side, and a small starburst or sun-like symbol in the upper right quadrant.

Work Cited

Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues." James Baldwin: Early Novels and Short Stories. Ed. Toni Morrison. New York: Library of America, 1998. 831-865. Print.