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The Melody of Adversity and Reconciliation

Music is a powerful form of art able to evoke and communicate a wide variety of emotions. James Baldwin masterfully weaves music into his short story “Sonny’s Blues” as two estranged brothers embark on a journey of rapprochement. With jazz simultaneously being a point of contention and medium of reconciliation, Baldwin centers music in an intricate interplay between familial tensions, racial discrimination, and societal rejection. Most prominently, Baldwin employs music to emphasize the complexities of suffering, showing that it contains both hardship and hope. Throughout the short story, many characters struggle with inner demons, many tragic events occur, and many life-defining decisions are made. All of them are connected by music, the unifying thread of “Sonny’s Blues.”

Music has a significant presence down to the smallest details in the story, offering numerous opportunities for readers to connect it with the unpleasant aspects of suffering. On the most basic level, Sonny’s history of rejection and eventual drug addiction stems from his decision to pursue jazz over classical music, much to his brother’s dismay. It is important to note that his brother’s disapproval bears no malicious intent; the narrator simply wants the best for his younger sibling and was concerned about the poor financial security of jazz, asking the important question ““can you make a living at it?”” But this conversation opens a rift between the brothers, with Sonny saying to the narrator “you never hear anything I say.” This shows that Sonny was

stuck at an infernal crossroads, forced to choose between pursuing his passion for jazz piano and easing his older brother's concerns. By making Sonny choose jazz over his family, Baldwin prompts readers to regard jazz as both the cause and symbol of Sonny's subsequent struggles.

In addition, there are smaller scenes where music is employed to emphasize struggle and hardship. When the narrator is walking to the subway station with his friend earlier in the story, he peers into a bar with a jukebox "blasting away with something black and bouncy" while the barmaid served her customers. Baldwin then states that when the barmaid smiled, one sees "the little girl" but also "sensed the doom, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore." This clearly links the music from the jukebox with the barmaid's darker backstory, showing that her suffering hid behind a veil of perceived innocence.

Furthermore, readers are led to associate music with a particularly tragic event. In a flashback, the narrator's mother speaks about the death of his father's brother by a car full of young men. In the recollection, music is represented by the "guitar banging and clanging behind him" that is crushed and destroyed along with the narrator's paternal uncle. In addition to linking music to another source of suffering, Baldwin also connects it with racial injustice by noting that "the car was full of white men." Since the narrator's family is African American, this detail ties music with the broader discrimination the group faced in the pre-Civil Rights Movement era, adding more complexity to the hardships music represents in the story.

Music is later utilized to portray hope in suffering. Baldwin's depiction of the revival meeting has music concurrently represent hardship and hope, making it a turning point of the story second only to reconciliation between the brothers. In the revival meeting, three sisters and a brother sing holy songs to a crowd of onlookers with Bibles in their hands, creating a religious

facade. The author then states that the audience didn't "especially believe in the holiness of the three sisters and the brother," further saying that the lead singer "was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her." This implies that although the performers looked religious, the pious songs shielded dark truths in a manner quite similar to the barmaid. This further establishes music as representative of hardship.

However, later in the paragraph, Baldwin states that "the music seemed to soothe the poison out of [the audience]," putting them in a trance-like state where time fell away from the "sullen, belligerent, and battered faces." This is the first time in the story where music is described in such a positive manner, reflecting the seeds of transformation sprouting in the narrator. More importantly, it sets up the tone for an olive branch: Sonny offers the narrator to attend one of his performances in Greenwich Village. The poison did indeed seem to be soothed out of the narrator as he accepts the invitation, agreeing to listen to music he had earlier castigated Sonny for pursuing. This shows that there exists hope in suffering, establishing music as a symbol of that hope; after all the hardship and alienation, the conversation sparked by the revival meeting leads to the first signs of reconciliation.

Sonny's performance itself is the epitome of music dissolving tensions and creating hope after a long period of suffering. It facilitates the narrator's transformative experience that leads him to appreciate the beauty of jazz. In the beginning, the narrator's observations are laced with negativity, with him commenting on how "awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument." But as Sonny becomes comfortable in the setting and is able to take his playing to another level, the narrator's tone changes to one of awe and respect, representing a change in his attitude. He describes Sonny's fingers "[filling] the air with life, his life" and his

music “beautiful.” The exact point of the narrator’s transformation is when he remarks: “freedom lurked all around us and I understood, at last, that [Sonny] could help us to be free if we would listen.” This reflects his newfound appreciation of jazz as he understands the freedom embedded within. Understanding this fundamental component of jazz is crucial in reconciliation between the brothers, showing that music helped overcome years of conflict and finally ease the suffering.

The music from Creole in the performance also provides hope for the suffering due to racial injustice. The narrator states that Creole’s performance in the blues “hit something” in him, implying that the music was effective. In the context of the time “Sonny’s Blues” was published—the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement—it can be inferred that racial unity was reinforced in addition to familial bonds. The very choice of Creole’s name evokes thoughts of racial reconciliation, as “creole” is defined as a person of mixed European and African American descent. It extends hope to the readers themselves that their suffering under racial discrimination will soon end, bringing the story into the real world.

In conclusion, Baldwin uses music to argue that suffering contains both hardship and hope. In the first half of the story, the author intentionally inserts music into scenes filled with inner conflict, tension, or tragedy to emphasize the unpleasant aspects of suffering. But in the second half of the story, beginning with the revival meeting, Baldwin has music play a more constructive role in the thawing of tensions, representing the hope that exists amidst the gloom of suffering. In other words, music conveyed the duality of suffering, introducing an optimistic twist to an otherwise dark subject.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues." 1957.

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