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Listening Past Your Suffering

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Racism has affected every society from pre-colonial days until now. One of the most strained racial relationships is between the white and black communities. Carefully construed, James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" presents a realistic, first-hand experience about a misguided African American man during the Harlem Renaissance. "Sonny's Blues" tells how Sonny's brother and society, both judged and scrutinized Sonny and how their scrutiny and judgments reflect the social discrimination of the African American culture in this time. From the story's beginning, Sonny's brother presents a personal narrative regarding the uneasiness as he remembers certain things Sonny would say or do (Baldwin 52). By the story's end, Baldwin allows the reader to experience the change of heart Sonny's brother undergoes after Sonny returns home, and unravels the trappings of the pain and suffering the African Americans faced in this new century. Baldwin introduces the story *in media res* to employ Sonny's brother's first-person point of view as he discloses and settles his own questioning of Sonny's misguided life as a recovered heroin addict, jazz pianist, and victim of psychological violence at the hands of his family and society.

Witnessing the continuous struggle of a loved one is as difficult as witnessing he or she dying. The narrator is often portrayed in a state of worry or uneasiness in regards to his brother's lifestyle. Into the story's second paragraph, the narrator describes feeling "a great block of ice [that] settle[s] in [his] belly and [that melts] there slowly all day long, . . . always . . . at the moment when [he] remember[s] some specific thing Sonny had once said or done" (Baldwin 52). Simply reflecting on Sonny's behavior causes unsettling sensations within the narrator, foreshadowing a deeply rooted contention between the brothers. The reader can immediately pinpoint the first-person point of view and editorial narration through the narrator's descriptions of his feelings. In a heated discussion between the brothers, Sonny's brother vocalizes how he '"care[s] how [Sonny] suffers, … [and that he doesn't] want to see [him]–die–trying not to suffer"' through the use of heroin, also referring to Sonny's profession as a jazz pianist (Baldwin 68). Trying to not blame Sonny's habits as the source of his problematic lifestyle, the narrator struggles to communicate his thoughts to Sonny. Their conversation reveals how the narrator (or society) is deafened by his personal feelings (their perceptions) that prevent him from listening to Sonny's problems. The editorial, first person narration enables the reader to understand the reason behind Sonny's suffering and the narrator's naivety.

Presenting the story in a non-chronological order adds depth to the narrator's concern for his brother and the origins of his concern. After picking up Sonny, the narrator reflects on a conversation he and his mother had prior to her death. She asks him to watch over Sonny, but at that time, he was convinced that '"nothing [was] going to happen to … [Sonny], [because] Sonny [was] alright. [Sonny was] a good boy and … got good sense"' (Baldwin 59). He was foolish to

not pay heed to his mother's advice. It was not until after their mother's death that the narrator initiated a conversation regarding Sonny's future, and then realized that "he'd never played the role of the older brother quite so seriously before, had scarcely ever, in fact, *asked* Sonny a … thing. [He] couldn't see why on earth [Sonny would] want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, [and] clowning around on bandstands. It seemed—beneath him, somehow" (Baldwin 61). The narrator had believed that Sonny's dream of becoming a pianist for a jazz band was unrealistic, and that he could not make a sound livelihood playing an instrument. The interjection of the narrator's conversation between his mother and his brother explains his lack of connection with Sonny and his abrupt hesitation to talk to his brother. At this moment, he comprehends "that the world [waits] outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretches above [them], longer than the sky," but then notices Sonny's drink as it "glow[s] and [shakes] above [his] brother's head like the very cup of trembling" (Baldwin 72). Finally listening to Sonny playing the piano, the narrator witnesses Sonny's suffering subside, and that the cup of trembling and that physical embodiment of his great ice block reassured him that Sonny is in fact good and will be alright. The flashbacks show the evolution of the narrator's feeling toward and understanding of his brother.

Baldwin depicts a deeply ingrained pain within Sonny and connects it to the African American community with his short story "Sonny's Blues." It is one thing to be oppressed by feelings, but another to be shunned and ostracized by the society in which one resides. The African American community found peace and triumph in jazz music and other forms of art to express their lives in the Harlem Renaissance. They could understand society, but society did not, or would not, try to understand them. Though slavery had ended, the oppression did not, but the art that came from the deepest woes also created the greatest smiles. The narrator's first-person, editorial point of view explains the narrator's dull perception of his brother, embodying the African Americans attempt to gain society's approval. Living accordingly to society's standards is draining; every person and race will be judged by another based on physical qualities or characteristics. Even as judgmental creatures, humans must still learn to endure the good, the bad, and the ugly. Accept yourself and learn how to listen past your suffering.

References

Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues." *An Introduction to Fiction*. 11th ed. Eds. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. Boston: Longman, 2010. Print.