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The Song of Suffering, Reconciliation and Redemption: A New Critical Reading of “Sonny’s Blues”

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Abstract

This research paper examines the story “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin that depicts the everlasting sorrows and sufferings of two black brothers residing in Harlem, New York. The omnipresent suffering is caused primarily by their African-American identity that leads toward the split between the brothers and ultimately fuels the intra-racial conflict in the black community as a whole. In addition, amid the never-ending troubles and deeper wounds of the black brothers, jazz music, i.e., Sonny’s blues is offered as a soother and a healer that erases their pains and sufferings, and as a thread that reconciles, reawakens, and redeems the whole black community. To analyze such familial and communal upheavals which have directly afflicted the lives of the major characters in the story and the crucial role that jazz music plays in it, this paper draws the theoretical reading from a literary movement called New Criticism that treats a text as an autonomous whole, developed by Cleanth Brooks, Allene Tate, John Crowe and others.

Key Words: Suffering, Blues, Jazz Music, Harlem, Reconcile, Redeem, Reawaken, New Criticism

Introduction

“Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin is a short story of tumult and suffering faced by two black brothers residing in the black community of Harlem, New York. The story shows the conflict, separation and tension between brothers caused by their African-American identity that paves way to their conflicting perception of living and leading a life. Many critics claim that, this is the story of universal human predicaments and the suffering of the black as the white racist society’s gift to African- American people. Although I do not out rightly disagree with those critics, my argument is slightly different from theirs, that is, “Sonny’s Blues” is the story of suffering of two black brothers, the intra- racial conflict between them and the major role that music plays to erase their misery, to reconcile them and finally to provide them the redemption. To depict such suffering in the story,

numerous images of light, darkness and windows are used and music as such is used as thread for reconciliation, reawakening, and the redemption of the black community. To substantiate my argument, I will use theoretical lens of new criticism that examines text as an autonomous whole, developed by Cleanth Brooks, John Crowe Ransom, Allene Tate and others.

To carry out this research work, I have divided this paper in three main sections. The first section of this paper brings forth the literature written on my primary text, analyzes them and finally distances my arguments from the arguments provided by other literary critics. Second section is divided into two sub sections. The first sub section gives brief introduction of the literary theory that I use to examine the text, and the second sub section brings textual data, evidences, and instances, and analyzes, explains, and observe them by using the theoretical lens in order to justify my claim and finally the last section of the paper concludes my major argument.

Literature Review

Numerous critics have analyzed Sonny's Blues in the light of suffering of black people and role of the protagonist, Sonny, in bringing them out from their deeper pain and suffering with the help of jazz music. Patricia R. Robertson in his article entitled "Baldwin's Sonny's Blues: The Scapegoat Metaphors" portrays Sonny as the scapegoat who takes the responsibilities of releasing all his people from their sins and suffering as Jesus Christ did for humanity. In his reading, "The scapegoat metaphor is developed through music, with its links to suffering and brotherhood... we are dimly aware of this scapegoat pattern until we see the ...startling biblical image of the scotch and milk drink, "the very cup of trembling" which follows sonny's playing of the blues and which clarifies story's meaning" (2). Sony's deep attachment with music is associated with his act of drinking the drink of scotch and milk from the very cup of trembling i.e. he incorporates all form of oppressions, the losses and the deeper aches felt by black people in his music and finally sheds new rays of hope and reconciliation among his people. The "cup of trembling" has a symbolic meaning i.e., Jesus Christ drank cup of Gethsemanes symbolizing removal of sins for all who believe and hope for eternal life.

Another critic Steven C. Tracy, who takes the story as Baldwin's attempt to expose the hardship and suffering of black in America, calls Sonny's Blues the masterful depiction of relation of jazz music, musician and the black community of America. As he argues:

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" has been lauded as a masterful depiction of the relation of jazz music and jazz musician to the African-American community. Looking more closely at the variety of African-American musical genres to which Baldwin refers in the story, we can discern even more the nuances of unity that Baldwin creates in his story, through musical allusions, and shed greater light on Baldwin's exploration of complexities of African - American life and music, all of which have as their core elements of human isolation, loneliness, and despair ameliorated by artistic expression, hope and the search for familial ties. (2)

Tracy's claim highlights the role of music and musician in healing all sorts of pain and suffering in black people's lives. His argument also parallels the music with the medicine which heals even the major wounds of African-American's lives. Literary critic Roy Decarava in his article entitled "The Sound I Saw," puts similar emphasis on the crucial role that jazz music plays in the life of jazz musician that ultimately affects every sphere of his community. For him black people's lives begin and end with the jazz. To put in Roy's own words, "Everything a jazzman feels, sees, hears, everything he was and is becomes the source and object of his music. It is music purchased with dues of hardship, suffering and pain, optimism and love" (2003).

Furthermore, critic Radiclan Clytus links Sonny's love for jazz with human's existential suffering. As Clytus writes, "Sony's Blues, much like Baldwin's nonfiction proffers ... portrait of the alienation inherent to human existence ... illustrates Baldwin's belief that music is perhaps best suited to illumine our ability to cope with existential suffering" (6). The isolation of characters like Sonny, his brother and his friend along with whole community is seen as universal human condition under which an individual is fragmented, alienated and lonely whose loneliness can possibly be mitigated through music.

Richard N. Albert in reading the story puts forward a slightly different observation of the story. For him, "Sonny's Blues" is the story of role of blues in foregrounding the notion of individualism which is more important than its role associated with revival of black heritage, and reflection on the alienation and suffering a black character goes through. As the lines in Albert's essay read:

When Sonny plays the blues at the end of the story, it is the black heritage reflected in the blues that impress itself upon Sony's brother and brings him back into the community of his black brothers and sisters. Beyond this basic use of blues motif as background unhappiness of the narrator and Sonny and their resultant alienation from one another, Baldwin uses the jazz motif to emphasize the theme of individualism. (3)

As per his claim, Sonny's obsession with music that Baldwin focuses on, is due to the result of his quest for identity which is different from the shared identity of his community and the narrator too is struggling to get himself recognized as an intellectual and scholarly individual. Critic like Michal Clark observes the story simply as the story of reconciliation, music and importance of music in black heritage. Crark writes, "Sonny's Blues' is a sensitive story about the reconciliation of two brothers ... an examination of the importance of black heritage and the central importance of music in that heritage and in human existence" (2). Clark focuses on how Baldwin vividly depicts Sonny and his brother's fragmented relationship, how their suffering and loss i.e. death of uncle is incorporated in music and the decisive role music play in harmonizing brothers, in saving the black heritage and finally the black's life itself.

Distinct from the claims made by all above mentioned critics, Caitlin Stone in her article entitled "Lost and Found: The Fall of Grace in Sonny's Blues," examines the symbolic meaning of fall of the little girl Grace, narrator's daughter and argues that her fall stands for fall of faith and fall of brotherhood and the eventual reconciliation followed by narrator's understanding of the real pain caused by Grace's death. Stone writes, "the troubles and misunderstanding that looms between them last most of the story, but it begins to come to resolution around the time ... Grace dies ... Grace and her death ... are symbolic, paradoxical elements of the narrative ...serve to illuminate the tension and eventual reconciliation between the narrator and Sonny" (3).

All the above-mentioned critics have some commonalities in their arguments in analyzing the story. The common theme they find in the story is suffering of African - American, fragmented relationships between brothers, the representation of black heritage and the prime role music plays in reconciling the relation, healing the wounds and in saving the heritage. Although they have dealt with the major issues of the story, they have failed to show the obvious connection between how the omnipresent apparition of white American in the lives of the African -American gives way to the intra-racial conflict between the brothers and the particular instances of various forms of music, mainly the jazz that inhabit the story, work as a thread to reconcile, reawake and redeem the brothers and the community. I believe that my research paper will turn into a beneficial one to fill the gap they have created vis-à-vis major choice of words and languages such as image of darkness,

light, window, the tone of the story, the tension that we experience which contributes to suffering and finally the allusion of “cup of trembling” referring to the redemption of black people that parallels the redemption of whole human race.

Methodology

In order to successfully produce my paper, I have substantiated my argument with the theoretical lens of new criticism that treats a text itself as the sufficient entity to produce the meaning. For new critics as Lois Tyson quotes, “If it is a well written text, each element in it contributes to each other and all the elements in the text work together and there has to be perfect marriage between form and content” (52). New critics takes the text as an organic unity and does the close reading of text, and suggests to analyze the various figure of speech such as metaphor, simile, paradox, irony, ambiguity, tension images and symbols in a literary text and observe how all those elements contribute to the theme of the text. According to new critics, complexities of text is created by the multiple and often conflicting meanings woven through it. One major new critic Allene Tate while defining one of the major elements that new critics examine, the term ‘tension’ in poetry writes, “I am using the term tension not as a general metaphor, but as special one, derived from lopping the prefixes off the logical terms extension ... the meaning of poetry is it’s tension the full of organized body of all the extension and intention that we can find in it” (283). My major focus in reading this story to analyze various elements of text such as light, darkness, windows, music and the characters themselves which work as different figure of speech.

Textual Analysis

To rephrase my claim, “Sony’s Blues” is a story that deals with the suffering and conflicts among two African - American brothers, role of music in the elimination of that suffering and its power to reconcile the conflicts, to reawake, and to redeem people from their predicaments. In the very beginning of the story, we can feel the tension as the narrator is split between two opposite selves. When the narrator gets the news of his brother Sonny’s arrest for peddling and consuming heroin, the narrator who behaves like a white’s man’s double and who have internalized the oppression of white men, finds it very hard to believe and tries detaching himself from his brother. The line in the story “I read it and couldn’t believe it ... read it again, I was scared, scared for Sonny ... I couldn’t find any room for it” (17), clearly shows the double halves of the narrator’s self. Furthermore, when the narrator sees his brother’s friend, their too his fragmented self is observed, i.e. “[a] boy from around our block ... Sonny’s friend ... I hated him ... I couldn’t stand the way he looked at me partly like a dog” (19). Both instances clarify the identity crisis in the narrator who can neither associate himself with his people nor with white, his oppressor, and this crisis caused primarily from their long time oppressed position that ultimately gives way to tension in the story which is resolved only at the end of it.

Furthermore, in his detached positionality and in his rejection of the black identity, we can see the irony. All the time, he keeps detaching himself from his brother and his people, sometimes by restating his identity as an algebra teacher and other time by breaking his promise to stand by the side of his younger brother Sonny, the promise he made with his mother.

The story is full of metaphors that is the ideas and words in the story which are directly compared with something else. For instance, news of Sonny’s arrest and the tension and suffering that narrator feels is compared with a great bulk of ice that weighs heavy in narrator’s stomach once he reads the news of Sonny’s arrest. As the line reads, “a great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting ... it was special kind of ice ... sending trickles of ice water all up and

down veins, but it never got less” (26). The ice here works as metaphor for his traumatic situation after getting the news of his brother’s imprisonment. Another example of metaphor that repeatedly occur in the story is the metaphor of window. Time and again, the characters in the story look through the windows. The narrator looks at the boys in his school’s courtyard through the window, the narrator and Sonny both look through the window of cab “to the part of ourselves which had been left behind” and near around the ending of the story the narrator looks through his “living room window” to the few black sisters and a brother who are carrying out the revival song “’tis the old ship zion ... it has rescued many thousands.” In all these three instances, the place inside the window is compared with the suffocation, the troubles, the hardships of blacks and the window is compared with the ray of hope through which these characters feel their people calling them outside in order to celebrate their lives together, in order to deal with their suffering together that would reawake their beings.

The whole story gives the various examples of deep suffering of African -American people through the suffering of major characters. Imprisonment of Sonny stands for imprisonment of whole black people. Sonny himself is a symbolic character who represents his whole race. As many blacks are arrested in the charge of drug use, Sonny too “had been picked ... in raid on ... for peddling and using heroin” (21). Some other striking examples of suffering are Sonny’s letter to his brother that reads “but now I feel like a man who’s been trying to climb us out of some deep, real deep and funky hole ... trouble is the one thing that never get stopped” (22) and the narrator’s descriptions of similar fate of the black children that they had been once, i.e., “the boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves behind as some animal’s amputee a leg and leave it in the dark” (24). The line depicts the never-ending chain of black people’s suffering in white racist America. Even the dress that Sonny’s mother used to wear “the pale blue dress” symbolically stands for suffering and sadness of black’s lives. The course of black’s suffering is never ending and it is recurrently hinted in the story that the similar destiny is waiting for every other black as long as they choose to live in white man’s world. In the story, the narrator recalls his mother saying how hopelessly his father exclaimed, “safe hell! Aint no place safe for black kids nor nobody” (38), and in reminding him how desperately she expresses the ill fate into which sonny would get trapped into regardless of being a good human, i.e., “it aints a question of being a good boy nor of his having good sense” (38).

Moreover, the story is full of darkness imageries that symbolically represent the dark side of black people’s life, their hardships and troubles that they face while living in their master’s world. When the narrator recalls how his old church folks who used to stay in living room all gathered together, the image of darkness is vividly brought into the foreground, i.e., “there they sit ... the night is creeping up outside ... every face looks darkening, like the sky outside, the silence, the darkness coming and the darkness in the faces frightens the child obscurely” (42). Even when the narrator describes the boys of his class, he implicitly states how badly their life is covered with hopelessness and inescapable suffering. The narrator claims that “all they knew were two darkness, (darkness as symbol of suffering) the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness” (33). Narrator’s mother in telling narrator about his uncle’s death tells how terrific darkness his father felt as “he never in his life saw anything as dark as that road after the light of car had gone away” (46). All these darkness imageries symbolically describe different forms of suffering in black people’ lives.

The story consists of light imageries too, that work as paradox in story. Light generally stands for brightness, it brings hope and beauty in life but the light in the story brings devastation

in blacks' lives, so the black characters in the story always try to avoid light in order to bring the real light amidst their suffering. The white men's car came with light and killed narrator's uncle, while the narrator recalls the living room full of church folks and the children he reminisces that, "When the light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows every time this happens, he is moved just a little closer to that darkness outside" (27). What is painful is as soon as the light reappears in the room the elderly blacks stop their earlier conversation which was filled with miseries, sorrows and oppression that prior inform and warn the children of the hostility and inhumanity that they will have to face in the outside world of light. The statement is very much paradoxical. The light is bringing the darkness in child's life and every time with the presence of light the child is moved closer to darkness. In order to feel real light in black's lives, they have to avoid the light brought by the white world. The narrator even brings the reference of how Sonny and his people avoid light in the jazz music club. To read his line, "The light from the bandstand spilled just a little short of them ... were being careful not to step into that light that if they moved into the light too suddenly, they would perish in flame" (48). Hence the light in the story, all the time worked as flame for black people, so, to avoid this flame producing light and to reach up to the real light, the characters have to keep avoiding the destructive light.

Most important of all, the music, especially jazz music plays a very integral role in the story. It works as means to give outlet for black people's hardship, suffering and troubles, reconciles the broken relationship between brothers and finally tries washing away every dark aspect of the characters' lives, along with their black community's lives. From the very beginning of story, music is portrayed as healer of every kind of wound that both, narrator and his brother experience. Time and often, the narrator brings the reference of music whether that is whistling or Sonny's jazz, his Am I Blues or the religious hymn sung by his mother or the music in bar and the religious song sung on the street by three black sisters and one brother. The protagonist of the story Sonny is very much obsessed with the music that, for him, music is life, his identity, his means of survival. Due to his undying love for jazz music, i.e., blues that gives outlet to his isolated self and his deep suffering, the conflict between two brothers gets heightened. Although it takes long time for the narrator to understand the value of music for his black heritage and his own personal predicaments, at the end, he too realizes the importance of music in black people's lives and heritage.

Through the jazz music of his brother, narrator understands the message the music was spreading, and gets reconciled with his brother. Music not only reconcile these two brothers and reawake their community but it also works as thread to turn the suffering of whole black race into redemption. To begin with the musical reference in the story, the narrator for the first time in the story, mentions the complex at the same time, soothing nature of music when he hears one of his student whistling amidst the trouble and dilemma the narrator was going through when he got the news of his brother's imprisonment. The lines in the story go, "One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated ... pouring out of him as though he were a bird" (reference made to Charlie, jazz musician to whom Sonny admires), "it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air" (2). For the narrator who was at his breaking point, the whistling turns out to be cool and moving and he is taken away from current tension.

In addition to this reference, the narrator gives another reference of music in bar thorough which, a poor barmaid is able to soothe and heal her wound. His mother too, who had lost her brother -in -law and her husband and who still was worried about the future of her child in that unkind world specially towards black children, keeps humming old church song "lord you brought a long way off," to soothe he inner being and to provide herself a kind of relief. Another absent hero

of the story, Sonny's uncle too is mentioned as passionate lover of music who was killed along with his broken guitar. The story brings the several references in which the narrator gets healed through music. When the conflict between narrator and Sonny reached at the top, during the time when the narrator tries bringing Sonny back from Greenwich village, he is terribly insulted by his brother, feels desperate and tears start rolling down his cheeks and to stop his pain, he starts whistling, "you going to need me, baby, one of these cold rainy days" (26). Every time the narrator feels lost, music turns out to be his companion. At one point, Sonny tells his brother that he left Harlem and chose music so as to express his grief. Sonny recalls his hard times in Harlem with his brother later on saying, "It's terrible inside, that's what troubles you ... there is not a living ass to talk to you have got to listen, you've got to find way to listen" (43). Every now and then music is helping these desperate characters to come out of their suffering.

Finally, the two brothers, after listening the religious song of the street start talking with each other in a way, they never talked before. Sonny reveals his suffering, tells why he left Harlem and the narrator who turns out to be in a good relation with his brother agrees to go to listen Sonny's jazz. The identity crisis, the inner tension of about the fragmentation of self and his community is resolved. When the narrator listens to Sonny's blues, he is deeply moved. The realization about where he actually belongs to, his love for his brother and the suffering of his parents, the memory of his uncle and daughter's death, everything gets flooded. In expressing his overwhelming realization, narrator states, "Sonny began to play. What they were playing was blues, he hit something on all of them, he hit something in myself. I saw my mother's face again and felt how stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tear again" (46). Narrator realizes the greatness of Sonny's jazz music. He understood how hardly Sonny was helping his people to come out from their suffering by arising them from their deep and deadly sleep of nothingness and non-existence.

At the end, the author has even made use of scapegoat metaphor by portraying Sonny as the scapegoat who put himself hard upon the jazz music to free his black race free from suffering. The lines that appear almost at the end of story show how Sonny redeem his people. To put forward the lines, "Freedom lurked around us ... I understood at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did" (47). Hence, through this line Baldwin makes his narrator along with we reader realize that the protagonist of the story is the scapegoat who along with his own suffering, is very much passionate to play his blues in order to free everyone from their blues. Furthermore, scapegoat metaphor is made even more vivid by bringing the biblical reference of drink of scotch and milk and the very "cup of trembling." This reference harkens back to Jesus Christ who for the redemption of the sins of whole humanity drank from the very "cup of trembling." Here in the story, by showing Sonny drinking scotch and milk from the very cup of trembling, the role of Sonny is shown as redeemer of the suffering and the sins of his people while dreaming of bright and beautiful future of all his people including himself.

Conclusion

To conclude, by the use of different images, paradoxes, metaphors and symbols like light, darkness, window, music, and many more, Baldwin becomes successful in resolving the tension of the story that was seen in the identity crisis of narrator, reconciles the ever-weakening relationship of two brothers along with their community with the help of music and finally turns victorious in making its protagonist a redeemer of his black race. Hence the *Sonny's Blues* by James Baldwin, is the story of suffering, and conflict of two black brothers caused primarily by a larger phenomenon of everlasting white's people's domination and oppression of black race and the decisive role that

music plays in soothing the wounds, in healing the suffering, in reconciling the broken relation and finally in freeing the black people from their sorrows, suffering and isolation, in order to lead them towards bright, prosperous, and harmonious future in which all the children of mother earth would be singing the same song of humanity and brotherhood.

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