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ENGL 325-00
Short Story Draft 1
February 17, 2005

“Sonny’s Blues”: Music Describing Life

James Baldwin’s story, “Sonny’s Blues” tells the story of two characters, Sonny and his brother, who live in Harlem. The lives of these two characters is simply a window into the lives of all who live in Harlem. The music that is found throughout the piece leads the reader from one scene to another. Music not only takes the reader along from scene to scene but is connected to many themes found in the story. The music in “Sonny’s Blues” is connected to the characters’ search for freedom, the expression of their suffering and their collective and individual life experiences.

Throughout the piece music is linked to the search for freedom from the suffering in Harlem. Sonny’s brother does not realize that he is even in search of freedom from Harlem only that there is a presence that eludes both he and Sonny : “I sensed myself in the presence of something I didn’t really know how to handle, didn’t understand” (51). When Sonny goes to live with Isabel’s parents Sonny uses the piano to free himself from his suffering: “Sonny was at that piano playing for his life” (54).

The idea that the world that they are living in has not changed and what they are living, hundreds have lived before them. During Sonny’s brother’s conversation with his mother she comes straight out and says that, “the world ain’t changed” (51). Sonny’s brother speaks about where he lives and what his children will experience: “it’s really just like the houses in which Sonny and I grew up. The same things happen, they’ll have the same things to remember” (47).

“All this was carrying me some place I didn’t want to go. I certainly didn’t want to know how it felt. It filled everything; the people, the houses, the music, the dark, quicksilver barmaid,

with menace; and this menace was their reality” (44). This for the reader is a turning point in which the reader can see that there is a dark apparition hanging over everything and everyone who lives in Harlem. This passage really makes the city a living thing that traps all of its occupants inside of it. Even those who escape from it are mutilated in some way: “Some escaped the trap, most didn’t. Those who got out always left something of themselves behind, as some animals amputate a leg and leave it in the trap” (47). The fact that Sonny’s brother calls the streets where they grew up the “killing streets of our childhood” (46) explicitly shows that where they live is a dangerous place and that they are all in search of a way out. When Sonny’s brother describes the Sunday afternoons that they had when they were young the reader is able to see that the adults in the scene are hiding something that the children are only beginning to realize is around them: “the darkness in the faces frighten the child obscurely” (48). The adults know that life is simply repeating itself all around them so they try to get away from the present by reminiscing about the past.

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around them: “the darkness in the faces frighten the child obscurely” (48). The adults know that life is simply repeating itself all around them so they try to get away from the present by reminiscing about the past.

In the passage “Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. [...] He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy” (63) the narrator comes to understand that the musician connects the people of Harlem together. Everyones misery is shared and the musician takes them away in that moment of his playing away from the world that waits outside that moment of music. The fact that the people stop on the street to listen to music they have heard all their life just to have a moment to get away from the trauma that is their lives, shows that they have a connection to music. The singers that have the revival on the street transform the people in Harlem: “the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition” (57). Sonny relates his addiction to heroine, to music, saying that it gives him the same feeling: “It makes you feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. [...] It makes you feel—in control” (58). Sonny further explains why there is a need for getting away from it all for a moment: “there’s no way not to suffer. But you try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it” (59). To Sonny his heroine addiction is simply another form of music because ultimately it has the same end for him, release from suffering and being in control of the world that is so overwhelming.