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Can't Spell Harlem without Harm

To understand a person, you must first look at where they come from; as people, we develop habits and teaching from other people and our environment. It is essential to understand the overall power in which an environment has and how it may lead to the characteristics of a person. In environments that may prove harmful to an individual, it is undeniable that the individual will be negatively affected by it. In James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" the sociology of the ghetto is broken down to critique and demonstrate the effect of living in 1950s Harlem as an African American man; the struggles and actions of the characters in this short story can be directly linked to psychoanalytic concepts discussed by Sigmund Freud in his "Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis".

In "Sonny's Blues" we are introduced to the narrator as Sonny's older brother; the reality of Harlem is recognized within the first few paragraphs. It states "They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two darkneses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together than they were at any other time, and more alone"(Baldwin 1). The narrator here is describing not only the reality of the young boys by the school but the reality of everyone in Harlem at the time; these boys are no different

from anyone who lives in Harlem; darkness has found them before they could realize that there was another way out of their world. However, the narrator unlike people in Harlem per says the character that looked like Sonny's younger friend that became a drug addict, turned this dark reality of Harlem into his inner drive to release himself from the grasp that it holds. This process is related to Freud's concept of sublimation. Freud states "...in which the energy of the infantile wishful impulses is not cut off but remains ready for use - the unserviceable aim of the various impulses being replaced by one that is higher..."(Freud 2238). The process for the narrator was his removal from Harlem at an early age to be in the army and also his current status as a Teacher in Harlem. Moreover, while mentally escaping the chronic hold of Harlem on him and the narrator is ultimately still lingering in its grasp because Harlem is, in fact, an inescapable place.

During the ride Sonny and the narrator shared going up to 110th and Lenox, they experience a self-search; the narrator discusses the landscape of Harlem:

So we drove along, between the green of the park and the stony, lifeless elegance of hotels and apartment buildings, toward the vivid, killing streets of our childhood. These streets hadn't changed, though housing projects jutted up out of them now like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea. Most of the houses in which we had grown up had vanished, as had the stores from which we had stolen, the basements in which we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks. But houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothering in these houses, came down into the streets for light and air and found themselves encircled by disaster (Baldwin 5).

This description of Harlem displays true the image of the ghetto, Baldwin uses this scene to show the non-progressing Harlem. A place where an individual who has grown and no longer lives in the environment recognizes the same issues they had in present day; Baldwin illustrates the endless circle of the ghetto of Harlem as a social place with his mention of boys being “smothered” by the houses they live in but leaving to get air in to only to be met by “disaster”. Each childhood adventure is intimately linked to different spaces within the neighborhood, showing behavior is an exact response from the environment(Kim). In this Case Sonny's response to his environment at first was his addiction to heroin in which he recognized and lead him to his removal from Harlem; but ultimately he turns his life over for his love for music. His devote focus on music can be characterized into Freud's idea on artistic gift, Freud states. “If a person who is at loggerheads with reality possesses an *artistic gift* (a thing that is still a psychological mystery to us), he can transform his phantasies into artistic creations instead of into symptoms. In this manner he can escape the doom of neurosis and by this roundabout path regain his contact with reality”(Freud 2235). Sonny's love for music is his drive, he becomes obsessed when living with isabelle's parents; They refer to living with Sonny as living with a “sound” rather than a person because this is his drive for escape.

Baldwins creates this story to magnify the failures and struggles of african american individuals in the 1950s; he does this by leaving literal and figurative instances in the story that represents the death of ethics,love, and most importantly grace. Grace is both a character in the story and a symbolic term.Gracie dies by falling face down onto the floor, This passing is not the only death in the story but it also represents the literal fall of grace in the story." Grace is a common name for girls, but Baldwin chooses it specifically because of what it means, especially

in the biblical sense of the word. Grace, in the Bible, stands for the unmerited favor of God. It is the extension of mercy, even when that mercy is unearned, and the Bible claims that for Christians “it is by grace you have been saved” (*New International Version*, Eph. 2.8). Grace is salvific, and it can rescue the believer in Christ from the fatal consequences of sin” (Stone). This concept behind gracee falling can be seen as the direct result of Sonny and the narrator complications in life. But this idea behind grace falling is not meant to be kept held to this one situation in the short story, Baldwin uses it to further show the negro life as a grace-less life; a life without the extension of mercy and savior.

Baldwin's use of language in “Sonny's Blues” allowed for a clear statement of the world he was critiquing; while he did not directly include racism in the short story was meant to show the effects of being in a racially affected group that has to live together; because of the unacceptance of the world outside of Harlem there is only one place for African Americans to be. However through “Through Sonny's Blues’ we see this place is not anything to be happy about, those who live in it are faced with the harsh reality of darkness, and those who have escaped are never truly free, they are forced to carry the baggage of the ghetto with them their whole life. This baggage carried by the individuals is what has drawn the psychoanalytic view on the text, the narrator and Sonny have synthesized their baggage from their negative environments into more socially acceptable actions. Ultimately Sonny's love for Jazz and the narrator's willingness to listen towards the end has reconciled their relationship, but they are still left with the inescapable darkness that Baldwin has escaped but at least they can live through it together with understanding.

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