“Sonny’s Blues”: A Marxist Analysis

James Baldwin tackles issues of race and class in “Sonny’s Blues” without directly referring to the tumultuous 1960s in which it was written. However, the story is easily interpreted through the ideology-critical perspective. It shows how the inequalities of race in the United States have resulted in permanent underclass status and misery for the black community. Social and economic structures work together to doom the lives of African Americans, who can perhaps internalize this only so long. They Americans can choose to play the game and be part of the system, or to ignore and live outside of it, something that Baldwin himself chose to do. The story even alludes to religion in a way that shows it as one more structure of society, that provides no true hope. In essence, “Sonny’s Blues” represents a critique of the American class structure and an appeal to Black Americans to defy it. Seen through this prism of ideology, we see how black Americans are doomed to remain at the bottom, how it is American society and its class structure that keeps them there, and finally how some form of rebellion seems inevitable.

The narrator (Sonny’s brother) gives us a look into the lives of African Americans as the bottom class of the societal structure. A teacher, he looks out at the boys in the schoolyard on the day he learns of his brother’s incarceration, and describes their lives as being lived in darkness and filled with rage. When he later picks up Sonny from jail, he repeats this idea, “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. Some escaped the trap, most didn't” (277). The idea of the hopelessness of their social station is repeated throughout the story. Walking down the street with Sonny’s boyhood friend, he passes a bar and sees a waitress. “When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore” (274). Through the narrator, James Baldwin is making the point that this underclass of black Americans is born doomed because of their race and their class. Life and hope are constantly juxtaposed against death and hopelessness. The green of the park leads to the “killing streets of our childhood” (277). When the narrator recalls watching his parents sit with church people in the house, he comments on how silence came with nightfall, and as the lights came on in the house, the children were filled with darkness. Throughout the story the narrator paints of picture of the light and happiness that should be getting replaced instead by darkness and death. All of this is a result of the race and class of the narrator and those people in his milieu.

Through the narrator of “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin is suggesting that it is the system that has kept these people down, without saying it explicitly. The narrator, who we know is a teacher and served in the military, still lives in a housing project. Even though he played by the rules, he finds himself in no better position than his brother. “Yet, as the cab moved uptown through streets which seemed, with a rush, to darken with dark people, and as I covertly studied Sonny's face, it came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind. It's always at the hour of trouble and confrontation that the missing member aches” (277).Twice in the story the narrator refers to faith, and in both instances seems to tell us that religion saves no one. This is classic Marxist theory in reference to views on religion being the opiate of the masses. His parents and the other church people grow quiet as darkness falls. Even though they believe in God, their religion avails them nothing, evil continues. Later in the story, he watches out his apartment window as a group of supposedly religious people sing, a song about saving souls. The narrator comments, “Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for the first time, not one of them had been rescued. Nor had they seen much in the way of rescue work being done around them” (287). Sonny here is the voice of Marxism when he says “Give my love to Isabel and the kids and I was sure sorry to hear about little Gracie. I wish I could be like Mama and say the Lord's will be done, but I don't know it seems to me that trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped and I don't know what good it does to blame it on the Lord. But maybe it does some good if you believe it” (276). Sonny is separating himself from Mama, who is silently oppressed by the opiate of religion, while he himself does not believe in it. The story is clearly appealing to a ideology-critical point of view here. Without saying it directly, author Baldwin has made the point that it is the American capitalist system and class structure, with black people at the bottom, which has relegated these people to hopeless lives. He also shows through the narrator and the church people, that playing by the rules and living within the social structures of that society, fail to help the people.

While “Sonny’s Blues” does not make a direct appeal to revolution against the status quo, it does allude to the fact of rebellion. We are told in various ways that the unjust system cannot be sustained, and the oppressed must somehow rebel. This is first shown to us through drug use. When the narrator and Sonny finally discuss Sonny’s drug use, Sonny says it is to be in control.

“When she was singing before,” said Sonny, abruptly, “her voice reminded me for a minute of what heroin feels like sometimes-when it's in your veins. It makes you feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And- and sure.” He sipped his beer, very deliberately not looking at me. I watched his face. “It makes you feel-in control. Sometimes you've got to have that feeling” (288-9).

Sonny’s music is more than just a backdrop for his drug use. When he first tells the narrator that he wants to play jazz the narrator tries to indicate he will have to play the music that will pay, not necessarily what he wants to play. “‘No, I don't know that,’ said Sonny, surprising me. ‘I think people ought to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for’” (283)? Here Sonny represents the proletariat against the capitalist system. Sonny is saying we should not let the system dictate who we are. The author makes a veiled statement about rebellion against the system later. When Sonny is looking out the window of his brother’s apartment and says “‘All that hatred down there,’" he said, "’all that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart’" (291). While this is not a call to action by the author, it is a warning. Baldwin is telling the ruling capitalist class that their system of class and racial oppression will result in rebellion, in the avenue blowing apart.

“Sonny’s Blues” is in essence a tale of two brothers, both black and both near the bottom rung of society. One brother, the narrator, lives within the structures predetermined by a racist and classist society. The other brother, Sonny, chooses the (softer) rebellion of jazz and drugs. He chooses an attempt to control his own life. Through both of them, we are informed of the hopelessness of black America imposed by the ruling caste. We see how societal structures, even religion, serve only to hide the issue, not solve it. And we realize that the only solution is rebellion. This may be the soft rebellion of choosing another way. However, if society fails to change and find a way to fix the problem, it will result in violence in the streets to overthrow the system in place. In a way, Sonny is prophetic, telling us what is to come. It is best summed up while Sonny is playing piano with a small band led by Creole,

Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell; it's the only light we've got in all this darkness (293).

Works Cited

Baldwin, James “Sonny’s Blues." *Arguing About Literature, A Guide and Reader* Stephen A. Scipione.

Boston: Bedford / St. Martin’s, 2014. 271-94. Print.