Marion Carter

Prof. Anderson

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Traps in *Sonny’s Blues*

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness. One ever feels his twoness—two souls; two thoughts; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”(DuBois 5). W.E.B. DuBois’s words are very similar to the narrator and Sonny’s sentiments. In *Sonny’s* *Blues*, the characters routinely battle the demons, inside and out, that have become arduous but commonplace to the Black American experience. The brothers in James Baldwin’s story represent two kinds of Black men. On one hand, there is Sonny, who finds himself infinitely trapped on many levels. Meanwhile on the other, the narrator symbolizes those of his kind who are under the illusion that they can or have already escaped these traps. The author suggests that there is no true escape from this two-ness through Sonny’s addiction, the hard streets of Harlem, and, most disheartening, the web of the characters’ very existence.

Because the characters are quite complex, it is appropriate that their traps are as well. On the simplest level, Sonny’s problems (thus his brother’s burden) rest on his addiction to heroine. He expresses his struggle when he confides in the narrator: “‘I thought I’d die if I couldn’t get away from it and yet, all the same, I knew that everything

I was doing was just locking me in with it. I didn’t know, I still don’t know, something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink”(Baldwin 45). Here Baldwin reveals Sonny’s two-ness. Part of him wants to be free of his dependency on drugs while the rest of him needs it to keep him from suffering. Sonny sees the irony, however, in that the heroine he uses to temporarily escape the problems of his life is

“locking” him down at the same time. Even so, he is unsure of whether he can ever truly give up the habit. As long as he is on heroine, Sonny will be yoked down and will never be free.

Just as the characters are trapped in Sonny’s fight with his addiction, they are also bound by Harlem. Though the brothers both hate the city’s personality and manage to get away for a while, they eventually find themselves sucked back into it again. This happens to the narrator when he moves his family into a housing project. “We moved in partly because it’s not too far from where I teach; but 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. The moment Sonny and I started into the house I had the feeling that I was simply bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape”(Baldwin 33). Of his kind, the narrator is one of those best off. He is educated, has a respectable career as a teacher, and “some would say [he] escaped.” Of all the characters in the story, the narrator is the best candidate to figure out how to escape his demons. Nonetheless, he is with Harlem the way Sonny is with his addiction: stuck. Although Sonny had left

Harlem by joining the navy, he later returns. “‘And then, when I ran away, that’s what I was running from—really. When I came back nothing had changed I hadn’t changed, I was just—older’”(Baldwin 40). From this it may be deduced that even though Sonny had gotten away from Harlem, it still existed where he left it—as a trap—and his revisiting that place means returning to shackles. In either case, the brother’s escape method is quite interesting. In order to leave Harlem they both join the military. The only change they undergo is from being held down by the inner city to becoming obligated to the United States government. In a sense, they never truly escape at all but instead simply switch traps. Through this Baldwin suggests that real, permanent escape is much more complicated than overcoming and addiction or changing one’s residency. The brothers’ escape is very complex because the weight of the trap is their own.

More than anything else, the brothers are trapped by the problem of themselves. Though drug addiction and Harlem are both hard enough struggles, Sonny and the narrator are also burdened by the frustration and inner turmoil of being a Black American man. Sonny laments that this is his primary trouble when he tells his brother,

‘It’s terrible sometimes, inside, that’s what’s the trouble. You walk these streets, black and funky and cold, and there’s not really a living ass to talk to and there’s nothing shaking, and there’s no way of getting out—that storm inside. You can’t talk it and you can’t make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize nobody’s listening. So you’ve got to listen’(Baldwin 44).

Here Baldwin reveals Sonny as a man totally isolated because of who he happens to be— which happens to be Black—but does not leave any hope for real escape—*ever*. Instead, the author goes on to suggest this entrapment plagues each generation and is a cycle by which sons, like their fathers before them, are destined to become engulfed. This is achieved by mirroring the characters after one another. The narrator, for example, most resembles his father who, during his day, was his own brother’s keeper. In turn, the brothers’ late uncle is most like Sonny: a wild, younger brother. Even the narrator’s sons are included because, since they are growing up in Harlem too and will have “the same things to remember,” they will also grapple in the same trap their kin had. All of this is possible by simply inheriting their father’s black skin. This is the trump ace card of all the characters’ problems. Because there is no way to escape oneself, they will be perpetually trapped “in one dark body.”

“All they really knew were two darknesses, 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 28). In *Sonny’s Blues* the author echoes DuBois’ argument about a two-ness one develops from being oppressed; but

expands this by asserting that, because of the traps life inflicts on certain people, this

“sensation” DuBois speaks of is unavoidable. For Sonny and the narrator these traps are drug addiction, the concrete walls of Harlem, and over everything else, simply being a

Black man. Escaping this darkness is impossible because, after all, the victim’s own body serves as the most devastating trap of them all.

Works Cited

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