The Brotherhood of “Sonny's Blues”

What is “brotherhood” – camaraderie? Having each other's backs? Where does brotherhood fail? “Sonny's Blues” was written by James Baldwin in 1957. Baldwin tends to use a lot of color and description in his stories to show meaning in his works. In “Sonny's Blues,” we see that the brotherhood between Sonny and his older brother was not ideal. In fact, there was jealousy, neglect, and suffering, along with eventual forgiveness – which is one of the fundamental basics of brotherhood.

Wordnet says that brotherhood is “the feeling that men should treat one another like brothers” (“brotherhood”). That definition seems a little vague, so let's put some foundation underneath. What does it mean to treat someone like a brother? Brotherhood should have certain traits like camaraderie, respect, love, trust, and the ability to forgive. In “Sonny's Blues,” the brotherhood depicted by the story was far from perfect. “I'd never played the role of the oldest brother quite so seriously before, had scarcely ever, in fact, asked Sonny a damned thing” (Baldwin 561). Although Sonny's brother may have loved him, he was also jealous of Sonny because “...Sonny was the apple of his father's eye” (558). Sonny's brother seemed to have spent most of their lives overlooking Sonny and discounting his feelings. We see how hurt Sonny was about his brother's lack of support for his dream of becoming a musician when he says “It don't make any difference to me. I don't care what you listen to. Don't do me no favors” (562) after his
brother offers to go out and buy all of Charlie Parker's albums. Obviously, there wasn't a camaraderie present because we get the feeling that their relationship lacked the easiness that they would have felt if camaraderie were present. In the end, however, there was a display of forgiveness and a new found respect when Sonny was playing the piano.

The scene before Sonny went on stage shows what brotherhood really is. Sonny's fellow musicians showed a mutual respect, support, trust, love, and the camaraderie that was missing from Sonny's relationship with his brother. When Sonny's friends were interacting with him in the club, Sonny's brother witnessed a reverence that appeared to shock him. It seemed as though he never expected Sonny to actually be good at what he chose to do. Earlier in the story, Sonny's brother got upset with Sonny when he told him that he wanted to be a jazz musician. During this time period in Harlem, the jazz scene was viewed as being unseemly or dangerous. “... the story of jazz almost always ended in tragic consequences” (Lopes 2012). Sonny's brother was feeling responsible for Sonny at this time because their mother had told him to “…let him know you's there” (560) even though he may not be able to stop anything from happening. Sonny lets his brother know his beliefs about the purpose of life when he says “I think people ought to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?” (562). Sonny's brother feels like Sonny would be wasting his life playing jazz, and Sonny feels unaccepted, unsupported, and unloved by his brother.

It appears as though Sonny's brother attempted to understand why Sonny did what he did, but just fell short. Then, when he heard Sonny play, he saw Sonny struggle with his emotions and caught a glimpse of the pain that Sonny had been dealing with his whole life. He gained an understanding of Sonny's need to express himself through his music. Finally, Sonny's brother
understood. He gained a respect, not only from watching how Sonny's fellow musicians treated him, but from hearing how well Sonny played and watching the emotion that poured out of Sonny through his music. Sending the drink to the stage was his way of saying “I get it!”, and as Sonny nodded to his brother, a bond of acceptance, and forgiveness was formed. It was as though the past had finally been put behind them.

James Baldwin was an African American novelist and playwright who was born in Harlem in 1924. Baldwin never knew who his biological father was, but was adopted by David Baldwin who married his mother. He was the oldest of nine children and after his father died, he had to work at anything he could to make ends meet for the family. He worked for the Army at one time, and although it wasn't stated, there could have been a younger sibling who resembled Sonny. Baldwin was 33 years old when he wrote “Sonny's Blues,” but, by this time, he had moved to France because he felt he could write better if he were away from all that went on in Harlem at that time. He wrote many stories about controversial issues such as racism, homosexuality, interracial relationships and other subjects that shocked his readers. It is very feasible that Baldwins stories came from his experiences in Harlem. The colors in Baldwin's “Sonny's Blues” have great meaning and help to express more of what life was like and the struggles that the African American people faced during that time in Harlem, NY.

The idea of brotherhood makes us think about trust, camaraderie, standing by someone, love, acceptance, and forgiveness. Baldwin did an exceptional job with the descriptions in the story showing the contrast between light and dark, and expressing the sorrow and suffering of these people in this time period. Even though the brotherhood between Sonny and his brother was flawed for many years, they finally made a connection and found forgiveness in the end.
Ultimately, we, as human beings, are flawed, and we sometimes make bad decisions, but I ask you – Which is more important – to hold a grudge and live in the past, or to forgive and be there for one another in the future?
Works Cited


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