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ENGL 119
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Short Writing Assignment #2

In “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin, smiles often reveal a vulnerable person hidden behind a mask. For example, when the barmaid “smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore” (20). The narrator receives a glimpse of who the barmaid truly is, without the preconceived judgments pressed upon her. Who, then, is the “real” person? Are we “most” ourselves when living in a world devoid of hardship? How do our environments influence our actions? Does that reveal something important about ourselves? For instance, Virginia Woolf’s narrator in “Street Haunting” fabricates an excuse to stroll through the winter streets of London. Does that reveal something important about herself or her environment? I arrived at these questions, but was unable to formulate an answer.

However, the simpler question “What happens when one smiles?” can be answered. When people smile in “Sonny’s Blues,” they are often revealing their true thoughts at the same time. In a letter, Sonny writes, “I guess I was afraid of something...you know I have never been very strong in the head (smile)” (22). Even though this particular smile is conveyed through text, it still reveals a terrified Sonny, who has been “trying to escape from something” but doesn’t know how. In the case of the barmaid, the smile reveals the struggling “little girl” hiding in the recesses of the “semi-whore’s” mind (20). In both cases, the smile reveals an unseen life. Is it a defense mechanism, or a subconscious expression? The text leaves room for interpretation.

In another portion of the text, Baldwin suggests that the smile reveals the childlike (and thus helpless) person. He writes, “Yet, when [Sonny] smiled...the baby brother I’d never known

looked out from the depths of his private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light” (23). The diction is intriguing; the word “coaxed,” often used for animals (indeed, the narrator even compares Sonny to an animal) or stubborn children, is paired with the word “waiting.” The helpless secretly long for someone to gently come and save them from the lurking shadows created by their masks. This observation may lead one to ask, what is the motivation (subconscious or otherwise) behind a smile? Does Baldwin use smiles to reveal the characters’ inner, vulnerable, helpless selves, and their implicit cries for intervention?

As the story continues and Sonny’s life is consumed by the piano, “some cloud, some fire” (34) envelopes him. His hosts only hear “noise”; they cannot, or are not given the chance to, understand Sonny’s ardor for jazz. Finally, when they “penetrated his cloud,” he “could hardly help feeling that they had stripped him naked and were spitting on that nakedness.” Here, the lack of a smile is important: Sonny does not desire intervention. He does not want to reveal himself. Therefore, when the hosts pierce his protective “cloud,” he feels “naked” and exposed. However, this incident catapults a series of events that brings Sonny joy; in the concluding page, his struggles pour out from his music, and he is well-received by his audience. The “cloud” is gone, but Sonny achieves bliss.

Additionally, in “Moments of Being,” Virginia Woolf comments on a “cotton wool” which very much resembles Sonny’s “cloud.” The haze is comfortable, but dulls the senses. In both texts, the puncturing of these enveloping blankets are violent, sudden, uncomfortable, and undesirable. However, they “shock” the characters into seeing their lives with clarity; they gain awareness. In the end, do both Woolf and Baldwin suggest that these violent shocks are needed to produce a satisfying, memorable life?