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In Dr. John Carson’s Short Story class (English 34031), Robert Berens was asked to pose a question about a story that was covered in the course and then answer it using supporting details from that story. “Looking Through the Smoke in ‘Sonny’s Blues,’” the result of Berens’ response, examines the existence of cigarette smoke “as a character in the story rather than a mere byproduct of another habitual vice.”

Looking Through the Smoke in “Sonny’s Blues”

James Baldwin’s story of redemption and musical epiphany is filled with gritty realism and thematic uses of music and imagery. One of the strongest themes throughout the story is the use of cigarette smoking as a symbol of interpersonal barriers and depravity. The specific act of smoking not only provides substance to a number of characters within the story, but also symbolizes the dishonesty and unapproachable nature of each particular smoker. Likewise, each time a cigarette is tossed away or extinguished, the act is accompanied by brutal honesty and revelation. Cigarette smoke, then, exists as a character in the story rather than a mere byproduct of another habitual vice.

As the clichéd phrase “smoke screen” suggests, the presence and creation of smoke are a character’s subconscious way of distancing him or herself from others within the story. Nearly every scene depicts a character in the act of smoking, particularly when confronted with difficult dialogue or when attempting to hide his or her feelings. When the narrator first learns of Sonny’s arrest, he immediately encounters a former associate of his brother’s. After learning through his narration how angry and contemptuous the narrator feels toward this shady character, “…now, abruptly, I hated him,” it becomes apparent how further irritated he is by the boy’s smug manner (75). His reply to the boy’s “repulsive” grin is to effectively disassociate himself from him through a wall of cigarette smoke: “I offered him a cigarette and I
watched him through the smoke” (75). It is as if the unsavory drug addict and his irritating familiarity with the narrator’s brother are only tolerable through this protective veil.

The boy is aided by the smoke in a different manner. Through his “smoke screen,” he is able to deceive the narrator regarding the fate of his brother. He retains the cigarette as a means by which he can skirt the issue of what is to become of Sonny. At this point, the boy becomes openly honest only as he finishes the cigarette: “Maybe he’ll even think he’s kicked the habit. Then they’ll let him loose” — he gestured, throwing his cigarette into the gutter. ‘That’s all.’” (77). With that disposable gesture, it is as if the boy is either able to or can’t help telling the painful truth.

Baldwin’s narrator, feeling his mother’s burden of protector and keeper of his little brother, seems to have always utilized this strategic and subliminal defense mechanism. As the reminiscent order of the narrative shows, this is a device that has been used by Sonny and his older brother throughout their relationship. Following the death of their mother, the first time that the older brother must act out her request, the conversation between him and Sonny is punctuated by the lighting and smoking of cigarettes. Beginning openly and honestly, the brothers discuss Sonny’s future plans. When Sonny suggests that he dreams of being a musician, tension is created between the two. The narrator, feeling that his authority is being questioned and threatened, displays a tone of condescension, imploring Sonny to “Be serious”. He further preaches to his defensive little brother: “Well, you may think it’s funny now, baby, but it’s not going to be so funny when you have to make your living at it, let me tell you that” (84). His lack of understanding and parental chiding increase the unease between them, and, almost as if on cue, the cigarettes appear.

At Sonny’s mention of one of his favorite Jazz musicians, his older brother is bemused and lights a cigarette while smugly quipping, “You’ll have to be patient with me. Now. Who’s this Parker character?” ‘He’s just one of the greatest jazz musicians alive,’ said Sonny, sullenly, his hands in his pockets, his back to [the narrator]’” (85). As the narrator creates his protective screen, behind which he is able to dole out authoritarian advice, Sonny further distances himself by literally turning his back. Possibly recognizing his error, the narrator attempts to rationalize with his brother asking, “Doesn’t all this take a lot of time?” (85). The emotional damage, however, has been done.
Sonny responds: “He stopped at the kitchen table and picked up my cigarettes” (86), ironically not with just any cigarettes but the very ones which the narrator uses to create his own impenetrable veil of smoke. Testing his “courage to smoke in front of [the narrator],” he questions the very integrity of his supposed guardian (86). Sonny turns the tide of the conversation, inquiring about his older brother’s youthful activities, “Come on, now. I bet you was smoking at my age, tell the truth” (86). Grinning defensively at having his dreams of Jazz discounted, he jabs his elder where he is most sensitive. He threatens to join the army, which is his brother’s worst fear. When the narrator is able to ground him with the mention of school, the honesty returns, as Sonny relinquishes his cigarette and begins to reveal what is happening to him there.

There is a notable change in Sonny’s and the conversation’s tone at this point. Sonny’s mood becomes remarkably somber, and through his uncharacteristically serious comments, he reveals the very root of his problem. He implies that he feels trapped and helpless, accented by his discarding of the cigarette. The narrator remembers:

“I ain’t learning nothing in school,” he said. “Even when I go.” He turned away from me and opened the window and threw his cigarette out into the narrow alley. I watched his back. “At least, I ain’t learning nothing you’d want me to learn.” He slammed the window so hard I thought the glass would fly out, and turned back to me. “And I’m sick of the stink of these garbage cans!” (86)

Sonny’s desperation and awareness of his fate surface as he flicks his cigarette symbolically into the alley below. Landing amid the “stink of [the] garbage cans”, the fading source of enveloping smoke seems to remind Sonny of the inescapable street, “black and funky and cold,” that he is resigned to (92).

Later, the narrator witnesses the depravity of the street firsthand while watching a tambourine revival meeting that takes place below the window of Sonny’s room. As the revivalists dance and sing praise, he notices the contrasting element of “street” people who are unable to be moved by the joyful noise. Again, the appearance and mannerisms of cigarette smoking are used to describe some of the more detached, unmoved spectators: “The barbecue cook, wearing a dirty white apron, ... and a cigarette between his lips, stood in the doorway, watching them” (89). Baldwin’s narrator continues to observe the cold reaction from some of the street members—“Neither did they especially believe in the
holiness of the three sisters and the brother”—and the seemingly small degree of enlightenment that separates the revivalists from them: “The woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips...” (90). The narrator observes the changing effect that the music has on one particular bystander: “The barbecue cook half shook his head and smiled, and dropped his cigarette and disappeared into his joint” (90). Ironically, he spots Sonny among the crowd “very faintly smiling, standing very still” without the habitual cigarette (90). The remarkable air of peace that he gets from the music is even further portrayed as he appears in the house to invite his older brother to accompany him that evening. In the absence of smoke, in the soothing atmosphere of the revival’s musical redemption, there is a comfortable understanding between the two.

It is in this figuratively “smoke free” environment that the two final scenes of revelation take place. Somehow finally able to communicate, Sonny explicitly describes to his brother the need to play music, and its relevant similarity to his drug addiction. The narrator begins to realize Sonny’s plight, and arrives at a moment of understanding and forgiveness:

I wanted to say more, but I couldn’t. I wanted to talk about will power and how life could be — well, beautiful. I wanted to say that it was all within; but was it? or rather, wasn’t that exactly the trouble? And I wanted to promise that I would never fail him again. But it would all have sounded —empty words and lies. (92)

Recognizing his lack of compassion, the narrator ultimately sees Sonny’s implicit humanity.

Thus, when accompanying him to the nightclub “[squeezing] through the narrow, chattering, jam-packed bar to the entrance” with “all that atmospheric lighting,” it is interesting to note that nowhere in the description of the setting is the mention of smoke (94). With the brothers’ new understanding of one another, the smoke literally fades, and even in a barroom atmosphere it is unnoticeable to the narrator as he observes “Sonny’s world. Or, rather: his kingdom” (94).

Baldwin’s story of “Sonny’s Blues,” the story of ultimate salvation, ends in a very clear field of vision. Having finally been able to comprehend and accept one another, the smoke between the brothers dissipates, and clarity is reached. The narrator passively observes
Sonny's musical triumph. Baldwin achieves the greatest effect by first allowing the reader to view life through the cloudy film of his characters' lives. Each of their personal withdrawals and withholdings of emotion is accented by their communication through this seemingly perpetual smoke. When Baldwin clears the air, in a literary sense, at the conclusion of the story, there is a very real, refreshing feeling of honesty and openness that might not have been achieved without the integral part that cigarette smoke plays throughout. It is this masterful device that allows the reader to almost unconsciously experience the discomfort of the murky discord and the comfort of resolution. When "the smoke is cleared," the reader can not only observe but also experience and feel.

Work Cited