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Lost and Found: The Fall of Grace in SONNY’S BLUES

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Suffering, misunderstanding, and brotherly division are some of the most potent themes of James Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues.” Set in 1950s Harlem against a backdrop of racial inequality and decaying urban landscapes, at its core it is an examination of the strained relationship between two brothers—the narrator of the tale, and Sonny, the title character. The trouble and misunderstanding that looms between them lasts most of the story, but it begins to come to resolution around the time that the narrator’s young daughter, Grace, dies. This tragic event may seem unrelated to the brothers’ reconciliation, and it is only mentioned twice in the entirety of the tale. However, a closer inspection of Grace and her death reveals they are symbolic, paradoxical elements of the narrative that underlie it and serve to illuminate the tension and eventual reconciliation between the narrator and Sonny.

Grace is two years old, a “beautiful little girl” (Baldwin 139), and the youngest child of the narrator and his wife, Isabel. Grace’s death is heart breaking to her parents, and it is preceded by her physically falling down. The narrator describes this fall and, though he concedes that “when you have a lot of children you don’t always start running when one of them falls,” that day, when his wife Isabel “heard that thump and then that silence, something happened in her to make her afraid” (139). Isabel rushes into the room to find Grace in a horrible, painful state, and it can be assumed that she dies soon afterward. This passing is not the only death in “Sonny’s Blues,” but it is perhaps one of the most significant due to the daughter’s name and what it represents.

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Grace is a common name for girls, but Baldwin chooses it specifically because of what it means, especially in the biblical sense of the word. Grace, in the Bible, stands for the unmerited favor of God. It is the extension of mercy, even when that mercy is unearned, and the Bible claims that for Christians “it is by grace you have been saved” (New International Version, Eph. 2.8). Grace is salvific, and it can rescue the believer in Christ from the fatal consequences of sin. However, the flip side of grace is to fall from it, to commit a sin or wrongdoing that takes one out of God’s favor. Baldwin was well acquainted with the Christian concept of grace, because “like so many Christian African Americans, Baldwin knew the Bible intimately” (Tackach 109). Despite Baldwin later renouncing his faith, he doubtless carried these biblical ideals with him. Thus, in this respect as well, the name of the daughter and what happens to her go beyond the scope of mere tragedy. They serve to turn her into a symbol that is key to understanding the relationship between Sonny and the narrator, both symbolically and biblically.

Sonny’s fall from grace is a literal one, in Christian terms. He turns his back on what he knows is right and starts using drugs, breaking the law and putting himself not only in prison but on a path to his own physical and moral destruction. The end result is that he finds himself alone “at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? my stink” (144). That stench is the odor of his imperfection, which causes him to fall from the favor not only of God but, metaphorically, of his brother. Sonny has come under judgment for falling from grace, and the consequence, like that which the unbeliever faces in Christian doctrine, is separation from the ones he loves.

Despite Sonny’s spiral toward destruction, the greater example of a loss of grace is paradoxically found in his brother, the narrator. The narrator, a successful, “moral” man compared to those around him, cannot abide his own brother’s failing, and this leads to an inability to extend grace to others. This is particularly evident when an old friend of Sonny’s meets the narrator at the school where he works and talks to him about his incarcerated brother. The friend feels partly responsible for Sonny’s drug addiction and, coupled with his own misery, it leads him to contemplate, “[I]f I was smart, I’d have reached for a pistol a long time ago” (125). The narrator’s only response is for him not to “tell me your sad story. If it was up to me, I’d give you one.” Although in the next sentence the narrator reflects that he “felt guilty . . . for never having supposed that the poor bastard had a story of his own” (125), he never apologizes or goes back on his remark.

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The overall collapse of grace in the narrator’s life is further evident by the promise that he makes to his mother but fails to keep. The mother tells him the story of his uncle’s death and then states that “you got to hold onto your brother . . . and don’t let him fall” (133), which he readily pledges to do. Yet shortly after she dies, the narrator asks Sonny about his plans for the future, and Sonny responds that he wants to be a musician. The brother’s answer is that this career path “seemed—beneath him, somehow,” a choice that “might be all right for other people but not for my brother Sonny” (134). He disapproves of Sonny’s dreams, and his lack of graciousness adds strain to their already tenuous relationship. He does not look out for his brother’s interests but thinks only of his own agenda for Sonny. As Grace has fallen and caused her parents so much grief, so grace has collapsed between the brothers. A fall from grace always has dire consequences in Christianity, and in the case of Sonny and the narrator, it causes them to drift apart and threatens to destroy their relationship.

Despite the negative consequences associated with Grace’s fall in “Sonny’s Blues,” her collapse is dialectic because it is a symbolically positive force in the story. As the loss of grace is detrimental, its rediscovery can also be beneficial. The way that the brothers interact begins to change for the better after she dies because, as critic James Tackach points out, “when the narrator loses his daughter Grace, he simultaneously identifies with the pain and darkness in Sonny’s life and realizes his own loss of grace” (113). In Christian teaching, it is often tragedy that makes followers of Christ aware of their sins and their need for God’s unmerited favor. It is “in [their] time of need” that Christians are to seek “mercy and find grace” (Heb. 4.16). Thus, the daughter’s death serves as the catalyst to make the narrator reevaluate his own life. It opens his eyes to his brother’s need for mercy and understanding, and he begins to extend the grace he has formerly withheld. He goes to see Sonny play jazz—a dramatic shift from his judgmental attitude about his brother’s desire to be a musician.

The imagery of the piano scene is another example of the impact of grace in “Sonny’s Blues.” While Sonny plays, the narrator orders him a drink. As it sits on the piano it, “glowed and shook above my brother’s head like the very cup of trembling” (148). The cup of trembling is a reference to a biblical verse about God’s wrath: whoever possesses it is said to be in God’s judgment or disfavor. There has been much debate about this reference in regard to Sonny’s and the narrator’s suffering, but it is arguably a link to grace as well. The narrator has passed this cup from himself, and though this could be seen as a passing of God’s disfavor to Sonny, it is symbolic of the grace that now permeates their relationship. It rests on the piano, not in his hand, as a reminder of how Sonny was once out of his brother’s unmerited favor but how he is now forgiven and understood by him. Grace’s death is at once a symbol of failure and falling from grace and of grace restored. The collapse of grace is the very thing that keeps Sonny and the narrator apart, but it is the fall of Grace that ultimately leads to their reconciliation.

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