

The impact of guilt in
sonny's blues, a short
story by james
baldwin



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In the story “ Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin the narrator explains the hardships that mainly his brother had to face, but also the rest of his family faced when he was a child. He displays this by telling a continuous stream of stories indirectly reflecting the racism and segregation faced where they grew up. Also, through this the narrator shows the lack of human rights given to people around him due to the circumstances.

Racism is the dark undercurrent that flows through “ Sonny's Blues”. It is rarely referenced directly but its pull can be felt continuously. For example, Baldwin mentions housing projects that rise out of Harlem like “ rocks in the middle of the boiling sea” (Baldwin 80). The result of local and federal segregationist housing policies, the projects depict the impact of racism on a community. However, even despite racism being slightly more prominent in certain areas such as the projects it is acknowledged that racism is still a threat anywhere when the narrator talks about how when his mother suggest the family move to a safer area the father would always say, “ Safe” “ Safe, hell! Ain’t no place safe for kids, nor nobody.” (Baldwin 81). Similarly, much of Sonny’s brother's dismay for his students can be attributed to the fact that they are much like Sonny and they live in system that will ruthlessly and endlessly discriminates against them.

Throughout the story it is apparent that many factors led to the difficulties Sonny faces during his life. However, it would appear that the main responsibility to his ultimate downfall of landing in prison is on the racist society he dwelled in. However, the responsibility ends up weighing on Sonny’s brother not only due to the inherent relational responsibilities between a younger and older sibling, but due to the request of their mother

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to look over Sonny in her absence. This request brings the constant and vague influence of racism throughout the story to the forefront, as, when the narrator's mother explains how drunken white men killed her brother-in-law and warns the brother that something similar could happen to Sonny, showing much of the suffering in the story referred to can be attributed to the effects of racism. The mother's actions are explained when the brother speaks of suffering as something passed down from one generation to the next in the African American community, making racism culprit of Sonny and his brother's current state of misfortune.

All of the subliminal insertion of the ever prominent theme of racism also addresses human rights in the story. Human rights are addressed in the aspect that many of those in the narrator's family and those in the community around them were stripped of them due to racism. For example, the way the brother describes the projects as being new at first, but later had become rundown despite the inhabitants' effort to keep them pristine like the home in a wealthier neighborhood. This somewhat implies that the homes were not good quality, as despite efforts they couldn't be kept up to standard. Being given these homes shows a lack of human rights since one of the basic human rights is shelter, and if the 'shelter' you live in is inferior to others it may keep you from moving towards achieving things other than acquiring a more stable shelter. Also, there is that fact that Sonny's troubles are due to the fact he had been engaged in activities that would help him escape the projects. The narrator acknowledges this saying, "The moment Sonny and I started into that house I had a feeling that I was simply bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape." (Baldwin 81).

It implies that their life in the project were so insufferable to the point that Sonny was willing to risk his life doing drugs and other illegal activities to get away from it. This shows how those in power had very little regard for certain people's lives and put those they lack regard for in positions that they themselves wouldn't want to be in.

Therefore, the narrator's recollections of his past show his feeling of guilt towards the hardships that have befallen his brother. This sense of guilt is also heavily shown through his sense of foreboding for the future of his students. These conflicts are intensified by the constant presence of racism and foreboding of hardships to befall him and those around him in the future.