

James baldwin's sonny's blues: to listen and to be freed article review examples

[Life](#), [Love](#)



James Baldwin's short story, *Sonny's Blues*, is about two brothers who grew up in Harlem, but end up living very different lives. The unnamed narrator is a married schoolteacher living a conventional life still in Harlem, and his brother Sonny is jailed because of a heroin bust. When the story begins, Sonny is in jail, but when he gets out of jail he goes to stay with his brother back in Harlem. Baldwin's story has many important themes, including human isolation, suffering, control, and artistic expression.

The theme of human isolation runs throughout the story and connects with many of the other themes. Upon Sonny's return from jail, the narrator admits, "I had begun, finally, to wonder about Sonny, about the life that Sonny lived inside" (127). Though he has known Sonny since he was born and had many conversations with him, the narrator feels that he does not really know or understand his brother. Though they have been side by side for years, they are isolated from each other by their lack of understanding of each other. Baldwin seems to reveal through the two brothers' relationship that this is a common aspect of the human condition, to be isolated from each other.

The suffering Sonny and his family have endured is immense. There are specific circumstances such as Sonny being in jail or on drugs, the narrator losing his daughter Grace to polio, and their father's brother being killed in a hit and run accident. More important, there is suffering because the Harlem world they live in feels like a dangerous and dead-end place from which many of its citizens fail to escape. Ironically, the suffering the people of Harlem endure can lead to great beauty; for example, after seeing an old-fashioned street revival, Sonny comments, "listening to that woman sing, it

struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through—to sing like that” (142).

The danger, suffering, and difficulty of escaping Harlem’s pitfalls illustrates the issue of control, or the lack thereof. The narrator’s mother addresses the issue when she tells him the story of her husband’s brother’s death, telling him he needs to look after Sonny. She says, “ You may not be able to stop nothing from happening. But you got to let him know you’s there” (133). She is trying to tell him that although there are many things people cannot control in life, there are a few things people can control, and that they should do those things for the welfare of themselves and the ones they care about. Sonny also addresses the issue of control when he talks about the reason why he took heroin. He tells his brother, “ It makes you feel—in control. Sometimes you’ve got to have that feeling” (142). In answer to his brother’s questions about why a feeling of control is necessary, Sonny explains it is needed “ In order to keep from shaking to pieces” (142). Sonny is not trying to defend using heroin as a good way of trying to feel in control, but simply explaining why some people including himself resort to drugs, because they cannot find another way to get the feeling that allows them to keep moving on in life.

Artistic expression is directly related to all of the above issues. In this story, music is a deeper way for people to communicate than just through words. People’s isolation makes it difficult for them to listen to each other or to be heard in a fundamental way. This isolation and inability to communicate is a source of suffering and part of the feeling of lack of control. In the last few pages of the story when Sonny’s brother accompanies him to a club to hear

him play the piano, Baldwin writes eloquently to describe how art and music creates a connection between people that cannot be established in any other way. He writes, “ Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did” (148). Artistic expression requires an intimate connection between its creator and the listeners or viewers. This connection between artist and listener fulfills the deep human need to not be isolated from one another, to feel in control, and to share if not alleviate suffering.

Ultimately, all of these themes-- human isolation, suffering, control, and artistic expression -are a commentary by Baldwin on what it is that makes life worth living and how people struggle to make life feel as if it is worth living. Sonny’s Blues is a story about the human condition, the challenges all types of people share, and how much better things are for people when they listen to each other.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. Sonny’s Blues, 1957. < <http://swcta.net/moore/files/2012/02/sonnysblues.pdf>>