

Mixed feelings about sonny in sonny's blues by j. baldwin

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A Way of Escape

An Analysis on Sonny's Blues

In the story "Sonny's Blues", written by James Baldwin, the narrator must deal with his confused feelings towards Sonny, his brother, when he is arrested for drug use. The plot may not be very clear at first, but it will lead the reader to experience Sonny's world as they figure out why he turned to drugs in the first place. Two of the settings in this narrative, the city where they brothers grew up and the club where Sonny plays near the end of the story, effectively shows the contrast between Sonny's pain and his method of expressing this pain as Baldwin's use of time and place cause the reader to relate to the idea of expression and being understood.

The city where the main characters grew up together reflects a mood of hopelessness, which is also prevalent throughout most of the story. As Sonny and the narrator make their way to his home, the narrator begins to think about the place where they grew up. He talks about the streets as if it is alive; that the streets they lived on were very dangerous (76). In paragraph 79, he starts to talk about his home as a child, describing it as "rundown" and an "uninhabitably new" with windows that "aren't big enough to make space out of no space". Overall, his description of the city introduces this mood of hopelessness that continues to creep into the flashback. Later in the flashback, Sonny tells his brother that he cannot learn what he wants to learn from school and that he wants to become a musician. The narrator dismisses this notation and convinces his brother to live his wife's family until he graduates college. Here, he spends most of his time on the piano,

which is his way to communicate his feelings. This gets the reader to feel that Sonny is misunderstood; he does not want to go to school and his family did not like that he practiced non-stopped (172). When he found out he was a burden on his family, he joined the navy. This hopeless mood is farther re-enforced by Sonny in his conversation with his brother. He tells him that there is no way not to suffer, but people do not want to just take it, but find an escape from it (210, 213). The conversation alone gives a depressive tone, but the mention of the rundown streets with uninhabitably new apartments and being misunderstood by his family conveys the setting of a city that provides little, if any, opportunities for escape for a better life, thus giving that mood of hopelessness.

The nightclub that is introduced near the end of the story gives a feeling of hope and breakthrough, which is contrary to the hopeless and trapped mood presented in the narrator's childhood. After the author reminisces on the past, he fast-forwards to about Three weeks after driving Sonny home from jail. That is when Sonny gets the narrator to go to the only nightclub in the intimidating streets. When they first enter, the lights were dimmed to the point where they could not see (229). This made the mood similar to the rest of the city. However, over their time at the club, the mood slowly brightens up, as the narrator meets all the people that Sonny knew at the club. It soon becomes apparent to the narrator and the reader that the club is " Sonny's world" and that he uses the club as a means to escape his reality (233). The hopeless atmosphere is no longer present when Sonny and the others start playing. In the club, the people loved to listen to him play and Sonny had an

outlet where he can vent his frustrations and hurt out through his music. This is especially prevalent when they played the song Am I Blue. On his solo, Sonny begins to vent all of his troubles, pouring all of his emotions into the piano and escape into his own world. The pain he pours out begins to touch the audience who are listening, especially the narrator. The narrator begins to think about the daughter he lost and cry (242). When the song ends, he is sweating and grinning. He is at peace because, after all this time, he got a chance to let out his pains for the audience to listen. Their applause show affirms that people care about what he had to say with his music, covering the entire place with a hopeful feeling. The way Baldwin uses this setting is effective in dynamically changing the hopeless mood into a mood of hope as he vents his frustrations through his music.

Baldwin's use of time and place effectively contrasts Sonny's problems to his own solution. The reader will feel the hopelessness of the dark and menacing city as well as the club that will give out a hopeful atmosphere. Overall, the reader may have mixed feelings about Sonny, but will surely sympathize with him as the reader uncovers Sonny's blues.