

Family dilemma in sonny's blues



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Sonny's Blues is a story written by James Baldwin about two brothers living in Harlem. The story starts when the narrator learns about his brother's imprisonment through a newspaper. His brother Sonny was caught using and selling heroin.

The narrator remembers his brother when he was young which makes him realize that his students may suffer the same fate. While in prison the narrator does not communicate with his younger brother until the death of his daughter. The two then remain in constant communication until Sonny leaves prison. Sonny then goes to live with the narrator. The narrator then remembers his childhood. He also remembers taking care of Sonny after their mother died. Their relationship is complicated as they disagree on Sonny's path in life. In the end, the narrator understands Sonny's struggles as he watches him on stage playing jazz. The primary dilemma facing the main character is if he whether to relate with his brother based on his own values or to respect his brother's perspective of life. This dilemma is related to the central theme of barriers in life caused by societal factors. At the beginning the protagonist decides to follow a paternalistic approach towards his brother which causes him conflict, he then chooses to listen to his brother after realizing that their environment was not conducive for success.

The main character is the narrator of the story since the entire tale is about the life in Harlem and the actions of Sonny through his view and perspective. The narrator's conflict involves raising his own brother so that he can be a great man. This conflict starts immediately he is forced into parenthood at an early age. While he is in the military, the narrator is told by his mother to take care of his brother after she dies. His mother insists that he should not

leave his brother no matter what happens to him (Baldwin 108). He ignores her pleas as he believes that nothing wrong will happen. However, his mother dies while he still in the military. The main character begins to experience conflict as he does not know how to parent his younger sibling. Until this point, his interaction with his brother has been minimal. He even realizes that he has not been playing the role of a big brother effectively. The dilemma in the story is seen as the narrator is expected to make critical decisions about his brother's life. One crucial decision that the main character is supposed to make is about the career of Sonny. Sonny expresses his interest in being a jazz musician. The narrator, on the other hand, is influenced by the expectations of the society and his idea about how life should be. He believes that it is important for a person to finish high school first then he or she can proceed to follow his dreams. He also believes that a person needs to go to college. The narrator also prefers careers that look more serious. He then decides to persuade Sonny to finish high school first a decision that he is not sure of (Baldwin 112).

The story shows that the narrator had a conflict with the decision he had made about the direction that Sonny should take. This is evident in the description of Sonny's life after his brother had returned to the military. Sonny was forced to live with his sister in law and her parents. At their house, Sonny was serious about his music and practiced the piano every day. He played the instrument immediately he came from school. Sonny also played the piano after dinner until everyone had gone to sleep. He also spent the weekends with the piano (Baldwin 112). This shows that Sonny was serious about his plans and willing to do anything to achieve his dream.

The narrator, however, kept on using his values to judge his brother. This continued even after Sonny had stopped living with his sister in law and had joined the navy. It is expected that the protagonist would allow Sonny who is now an adult to make his own decisions. He, however, continues to disagree with his brother. The main character explains that he does not like Sonny's friends and his music career. He believes the music is an excuse to live an irresponsible life. Eventually, they have a serious fight, and Sonny tells the narrator that he should consider him dead (Baldwin 113).

The author begins to doubt his methods of raising his brother as he fears that he is responsible for how his brother has turned. While his mother was alive, she put pressure on him by telling by telling the story of his father. His father's brother who was hit by a vehicle and died immediately. This experience affected his father, and he never recovered (Baldwin 107). The main character remembers this story as his brother had become a drug addict. He feels as if he should have done better. The perception of failure by the main character is also seen as he describes his feeling after finding out that his brother was sentenced to prison. He compares his mood to a block of ice that is melting and also expanding in his stomach causing him pain. The narrator feels this way because he did not expect his brother to turn out the way he did. Sonny was once a young boy full of promise (Baldwin 99).

The prison sentence adds more conflict on how he can integrate Sonny back to the society. He is worried that bringing him back home would lead to relapse since the area is the same environment which pushed Sonny to use drugs (Baldwin 105). This serves as the climax of the story as the author begins to focus on a different approach to their relationship. He starts to

listen to Sonny so that he can understand his perspective and why he made the wrong choices. Sonny opens up and explains how the frustrations in life pushed him to drugs and a reckless lifestyle. The main character also accepts to go to Sonny's performance. Watching Sonny sing makes the narrator understand his brother's struggles and feel that they could repair their relationship (Baldwin 121).

The primary dilemma of the protagonist is related to the central theme which is the impact of societal factors on the success of the individuals. Throughout the story, the narrator shows the influence of Harlem on his brother's behavior and their frustrations. He explains that it is normal for people living in the area to turn to criminals as they grow older. He attributes these frustrations to the lack of opportunities in the neighborhood. He provides an example of his students whose growth is likely to be stopped suddenly due to the low ceiling that is placed on their abilities (Baldwin 99).

The protagonist also explains that the neighborhood has a permanent impact on someone's life. He demonstrates that it is impossible to leave Harlem. If a person manages to get out, he has to leave a part of himself (Baldwin 105). This statement is evident as both Sonny and the narrator continue to live in the neighborhood several years later. Here the story shows that even though people take different paths in life, the outcome might still be the same due to the environmental factors. The protagonist's dilemma could not be resolved at first since he believed that he could change the outcomes of their lives by following a different path. However, the central theme shows that he had to accept his brother first and accept the challenges that they both face.

In conclusion, the primary dilemma facing the main character is if he whether to relate with his brother based on his own values or to respect his brother's perspective of life. At first, he forces Sonny to go to school and abandon music. This, however, fails as Sonny rebels and later on starts using drugs. Sonny is then sent to prison. The main character begins to believe that he is the cause of Sonny's failure. Later on, he starts listening to Sonny, and they improve their relationship. The protagonist's primary dilemma is related to the central theme since it is evident that environmental factors beyond their control cause the failures of the main narrator and Sonny.