

Short story sonny blues

Literature



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In James Baldwin's, *Sonny's Blues*, he uses many different symbols throughout his short story to present the overall theme of suffering to the reader. He uses symbols such as music, characters' facial expressions and the presence of ice, light and darkness. In the very beginning of the story when the narrator is reading the paper and he comes across the news of his brother, Sonny, he says, "A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long". (Baldwin 600) He also says "...it was a special kind of ice.

It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins, but it never got less." (Baldwin 600) This is not the only time that the ice presents itself. It reappears when the narrator meets one of Sonny's friends who is also a drug addict, and again later when Sonny is over for dinner with the narrator's family. The ice that appears whenever the narrator feels an uncomfortable or painful situation represents how the narrator is incapable of dealing with his own emotions well. The ice also allows the reader to empathize with how the narrator feels about how his brother is leading his life.

Another symbol Baldwin uses throughout *Sonny's Blues* is light and darkness. Throughout the story there is a contrast of light and darkness. For example, in the first paragraph of the story, *Sonny's Blues* Baldwin writes, "I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside." (Baldwin 599) This contrasts the lightness and the darkness. It demonstrates the contrast between his own suffering and the world around him and the suffering of the world.

Another example of lightness and darkness Baldwin uses in the short story is when the narrator's mother is recalling the story of the narrator's father and his brother she says " there was a moon that night, it was bright like day. " (Baldwin 607) This is when the narrator's father and his brother are having a good time and walking home. This brightness of the moon is used to represent the light, which represents all the hope and good things in life. The narrator's mother later recalls, " he says he never in his life seen anything as dark as that road after the lights of that car had gone away. (Baldwin 608) Referring to after the narrator's father's brother had been hit and killed. The color of the men's skin also represents the contrast between light and darkness. The men that killed the narrator's father's brother were all white and the other two men were dark skinned. This is also an example of the contrasting of light and dark. This shows how the difference of something in the same situation can both have two different results. Meaning that both the light men and the dark men were drunk. They were each also having fun. The situations were both similar, but the end results of each situation were very different.

One of the dark men lost their life to the light men. The darkness is used to represent the tormenting and dark moments in the characters lives. The darkness however is always stabilized with lightness. Just like the dark road was stabilized with the lightness of the car lights. This light is used to signify safety and comfort, while the darkness represents the turmoil also looking to destroy that safety and comfort. Another way Baldwin symbolizes the overall theme of suffering is through the character's facial expressions and interactions.

Baldwin writes “ And I watched her face as she laughingly responded to something someone said to her, still keeping time to the music. When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still struggling women beneath the battered face of the semi-whore. ” (Baldwin 602) This shows that even under her “ battered face” there was still a glimpse of when she was young. The narrator can see her as a young innocent little girl. This shows the reader that there is hope even in suffering. Baldwin is also trying to get his point across that even though one may suffer, the suffering will not change the past and whom you are or have become.

Another example of how Baldwin incorporates the facial expressions of his characters to help promote the overall theme of suffering is when the narrator is on the subway in the first few sentences of the short story. He writes, “ I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces of the bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness. ” (Baldwin 600) This illustrates that not only does the narrator feel and see suffering inside himself and his own face, but he also sees it inside the faces of others and the surroundings around him.

This also proves that the overall effect of suffering is visible to one who is suffering themselves, like that of the narrators. Baldwin also promotes the theme of Sonny’s Blues by using the presence of music. The entire short story is loaded with occasions of music. The overall title of the story even contains music. “ Sonny’s Blues”, promotes the tone and theme of suffering throughout the entire story. It provides the reader with information that there will be suffering in the story. Giving them an idea of what is to come

before even being read. Another example of music is Sonny's growing love for playing the piano.

The narrator states "...Sonny was so serious about his music and how, as soon as he came in from school, ...he went straight to that piano and stayed there until suppertime. ", " He was at the piano all day Saturday and all day Sunday. " (Baldwin 612) This tells the reader of Sonny's love for music. It illustrates how the music is Sonny's safety and allows him to not suffer. When Baldwin makes it clear to the reader that Isabel and her mother grow tired of the music, " it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound. And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them – naturally. (Baldwin 612) This proves that music can both heal suffering but also create it. The music for Sonny was a safety. To Sonny the music made him feel at ease and helped to subside his suffering. It wasn't until after Sonny stopped playing the piano and his records that he began to truly feel the power of his suffering. Although the music was a medicine to Sonny's suffering, it was the cause of suffering for Isabel and her mother. This suffering caused Isabel's mother to snap and yell at Sonny. This caused Sonny to stop playing the piano and thus the true suffering began.

Another example of suffering and music is when the narrator witnesses the meeting on the corner. He watches the battered people play their music and notices their suffering. He says, " As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last. " (Baldwin

615) Showing again how music can be a safety and a rescuer to not only Sonny but others as well.

By the narrator stating this it shows that it is noticeable of the change in expression music brings as it lessens the sufferings of those who play. “ Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. ” (Baldwin 620) Near the end of Baldwin’s story Sonny plays his music once again. To most, the music Sonny plays is merely for entertainment. But to some it is a story, Sonny’s story. As Sonny plays, the narrator notices the things his brother has been through and felt. While Sonny plays the narrator notices both his brother’s suffering as well as his own.