## Sonnys blues or to build a fire

Linguistics, English



Analysis of "Sonny's Blues." James Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues," is a poignant account of two brothers growingup in Harlem. The narrator is the older brother who relates the struggles of his younger brother, Sonny, to overcome drug addiction and find his identity and place in the world. However, the story is not only about Sonny: the narrator also gives the reader a glimpse into his own struggle to come to terms with Sonny's drug use, his subsequent incarceration and the younger brother's choice of jazz as a career. "Sonny's Blues" is essentially a family narrative based on the dynamics of the brotherly bond. Baldwin effectively uses characterization, conflict and setting to explore the relationship between the narrator and his younger sibling.

The contrasting characters of the narrator and Sonny delineates their relationship. The narrator is an algebra teacher, whose point of view describes his own life and Sonnys. He is a practical family man who is aware of his responsibilities and is content to earn a living and carry on as best as he can. He is willing to accept the status quo of the world. He believes in "will power and how life could be well, beautiful" (Baldwin, 21-1). He is seven years older than Sonny and feels a sense of responsibility towards his younger brother. He promises their mother, "I wont let nothing happen to Sonny" (Baldwin, 11-5). On the other hand, Sonny is the boy with "wonderfully direct brown eyes, and great gentleness and privacy" (Baldwin, 1-3), who is in search of meaning and identity. He is not content to follow the beaten track and wants to make jazz his life. Their contrasting characters leads to conflict in their relationship.

The conflict in the relationship between the two brothers is brought about by

two sources: Sonny's drug use and his choice of jazz as a career. The narrator expects Sonny to complete school and settle down to a safe, respectable livelihood. To the narrator, jazz is "hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people pushed each other around a dance floor" (Baldwin, 12-8). He sees no future in jazz as a way of earning a living. He cannot understand Sonny's stand "that its the only thing I want to do" (Baldwin, 13-8). To Sonny, jazz is his life. The narrator also cannot accept Sonny's drug addiction and finds his brother's life "weird and disordered" (Baldwin, 16-5). The conflict between them builds up and leads to their estrangement, which is emphasized by the setting of the story.

The setting of the narrative in Harlem in the early 1950s contributes to the dynamics of the relationship. This hostile world of dingy bars, prostitutes and drugs is a poor environment for children. The mother's attempts to move to a safer neighborhood fail and Sonny remains trapped in what his brother calls "the vivid, killing streets of our childhood" (Bang streets of our childhood" emains t. The

away from drugs." (Baldwin, 21-6). The narrator now acknowledges hisator acknowledges that

narrator and his brother. Their contrasting characters makes it difficult for the narrator to understand Sonny's drug addiction and jazz profession. This lead to conflict between the brothers and a period of estrangement.

Gradually, the narrator comes to understand the pressures Sonny has to withstand by growing up in Harlem and the central position of jazz in his brother's personality. Through Sonny's music the narrator finally recognizes what his brother has gone through. With this understanding comes

conflict.

Works Cited.

Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues." Title of Collection. Ed. Editors Name(s). City of Publication:

acceptance and the fraternal relationship emerges strengthened from the

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