

"sonny's blues" by james baldwin essay



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The narrator in "Sonny's Blues" is aware of social problems expressed in his brother's music. The narrator, Sonny's brother, realizes that music helps Sonny overcome his inner pain and suffering. For a long time, he has been detached from Sonny because they had different perspectives on life. Once they went to a night club where Sonny was offered a chance to play music to the audience. Therefore, music is used symbolically to connect the two brothers together because of their shared blood relations.

It gives the narrator and his brother a chance to escape from their pain, which they experienced while growing up in an environment full of poverty, crime and suffering. The narrator watches Sonny playing the piano in the club and concludes that this helps him deal with frustrations he has experienced in his life. He says, " He seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano. It seemed that he couldn't get over it" (Baldwin).

The narrator discovers that Sonny's true calling lies in music. He manages to captivate the narrator and other people who are gathered in the club, because of the way he expresses personal emotions through singing. Sonny is deeply involved in singing, which makes the narrator have strong memories.

The song makes the narrator have a sentimental reconnection with his past, because of the way Sonny expresses himself through music. The performance by Sonny helps the narrator understand him better and thus, it manages to bring them closer as members of one family. The narrator offers

Sonny a drink after he takes a rest from the performance. And according to the narrator, the one had carried him away. (Baldwin).

As Sonny continues singing, the narrator becomes more involved in his brother's struggles. Sonny interacts freely with Creole and other band members, which makes him realize the importance of forming strong relationships with family and friends. The narrator realizes that music means a lot to Sonny because it helps him build strong social bonds that give him happiness.

Sonny's musical talents and the way he expresses them enchant everyone in the audience. He becomes more excited by the way he draws them in. Sonny's lyrics resonate with most people gathered in there and for a brief moment, he helps them forget about struggles they are facing in their lives (Baldwin).

Sonny's performance makes the writer more conscious about his roots. The narrator and his brother had experienced a lot of suffering in their lives which affected the way they grew up. The narrator manages to reflect on the near hopeless situation which many people in the community face and finds solace in music played by his brother together with other band -mates. The experience at the club helps the narrator to discover his brother's true personality and his outlook on life.

This gives him a chance to reflect on his heritage positively, without thinking about the suffering which people living in surrounding areas have to endure every day. This experience makes him accept the difficult situations which he and his brother have gone through and gives him the courage to forge

ahead. He says " And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky" (Baldwin).

This self discovery by the narrator makes him understand his own background and issues faced by other people living where he grew up. Sonny has served a prison sentence which has made him suffer the pain of being incarcerated. He has difficulties in adjusting to life outside prison; a situation which is experienced by most former convicts.

The narrator becomes aware that his inconsiderate attitude towards the well-being of his brother failed Sonny and made him deviate into crime. He realizes that he cannot escape the reality that African Americans will continue being persecuted by the political system because of their race.

His brother did not get opportunities which would have empowered him to become a good citizen. Therefore, the narrator manages to overcome his fears and come to terms with the pain he has felt for most of his adult life. His perception of the African American society changes, because he gets to understand the root cause of their social problems (Baldwin).

The narrator leads a successful life as a teacher with his family, in a new residential area. This area is more comfortable and differs greatly from the unpleasant environment he was raised in. He gets to understand the importance of having compassion to other people who are not successful like him.

The narrator discovers the strong emotional connections he has with his brother, even though they do not share the same level of success. He learns that with the right determination, any person can get out of any hopeless situation. In the past, he thought it was wise to move away from where he was raised to a new area, which did not have a lot of suffering. This had made him reject his brother and heritage, so as to escape the pain he had lived with since childhood (Baldwin).

Flibbert describes the way the narrator has developed, " a mental and emotional state arising from recognition of limitation imposed-in the case of African-Americans-by racial barriers to opportunity" (69). This argument reveals how racially discriminative policies make it difficult for black people to live a better life.

Therefore, this consigns them to a life full of poverty, which makes Sonny and others like him to resort to crime and other undesirable activities. This assertion is true because issues which are raised in the story relate to what many African Americans endured before the Civil Rights movement era.

Clark explains the use of imagery in the story to show different stages of life which the narrator and Sonny had to pass through while growing up He says, " The light and dark imagery is pervasive in " Sonny's Blues" and that this imagery can be roughly equated with the respective conditions of childhood and adulthood" (Clark 202).

This shows that the narrator had not yet understood what made his brother and other people in the neighborhood to live in poverty. The narrator manages to overcome the rejection he had of his heritage, which had been

influenced by unpleasant memories he had while growing up. He has to deal with the burden of protecting his brother from any harm because of the promise he made to his mother before she passed away.

Baldwin, James. *Sonny's Blues*. Scribd Digital Library, 2013. Web.

Clark, Michael. "James Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues*: Childhood Light and Art." *CLA Journal* 29. 2 (1985): 197-205. Print.

Flibbert, Joseph. "Sonny's Blues: Overview." *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*. Ed. Noelle Watson. New York: St James Press, 1994. 69-80. Print.