

# Sonnys blues the troubled elder brother

Literature



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## Sonny's Blues. The troubled elder brother

Sonny's Blues is first-person narration by the elder brother of the musician struggling with heroin addiction and issues with law. However, on closer inspection, it appears that Sonny's unnamed brother is also very troubled. His difficulties cannot easily be perceived and recognized, especially by the character himself. The story gives accounts of the problems Sonny's brother has with taking responsibility, understanding and respecting his younger brother's lifestyle.

From the first lines of the story the reader gets the impression that Sonny's brother tries to block out, ignore the truth about his brother and his troubles. The reaction the character has to the newspaper article about Sonny was: "It was not to be believed and I kept telling myself that" (Baldwin 292). At this stage his relations with the younger brother remind of the way a teacher walks across the playground full of potentially troubled kids "though he or she couldn't wait to get out of that courtyard, to get those boys out of their sight and off their minds" (Baldwin 293). Having some suspicions concerning Sonny's possible drug addiction his brother chooses to put those thoughts away, tries to forget them, ignores the whole situation. He keeps burying his head in the sand even after Sonny's friend explains what future awaits narrator's younger brother thinking: "I guess it's none of my business" (Baldwin 295). It takes the tragedy of daughter's death to teach the narrator the bitter lesson that troubles and problems cannot be avoided and ignored. Finally the narrator is ready to take responsibility by acknowledging that his younger brother has problems: "My trouble made his real" (Baldwin 305). At that moment, for the first time in the history of their relations, Sonny's brother sees his younger sibling's life as significant and meaningful.

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Even though the narrator was older than Sonny, he never paid attention to his brother, thought about trying to understand him. Only when the brothers' lives take different courses the elder sibling remembers that he was present at all important moments in Sonny's life. The narrator was there when Sonny was born, when he learned to walk, when their father and later their mother died, but chose not to take interest in his younger brother's life. Instead he came up with the lame excuse: "The seven years' difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm" (Baldwin 296). When Sonny prefers the company of his friends he tries to make it clear that he sees people who respect his wishes and ambition as his true family. However, the narrator fails to get the true meaning of Sonny's behavior and feels jealous and vindictive thinking: "You going to need me, baby, one of these cold, rainy days" (Baldwin 305). The irony of the situation is that when Sonny is in real trouble the narrator doesn't have the courage to act like the elder brother.

The fact that the narrator is older than Sonny is the root of his behavior. In a way his "complex of the elder sibling" is the root of his trouble. In the story, Sonny's brother sees the people he encounters as children: "brought to mind what he'd looked like as a kid", "one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore" (Baldwin 294). Thus inability to understand Sonny's lifestyle and desire to be a musician is due to the fact that the narrator sees Sonny as his little brother, a baby. Only towards the end of the story the narrator realizes that "this life, whatever it was, had made him older and thinner and it had deepened the distant stillness in which he had always moved. He looked very unlike my baby brother" (Baldwin 296). This discovery prompts the narrator to wonder about Sonny's thoughts and wishes and gives the

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brothers a chance to reconcile.

Despite that fact that in Sonny's Blues only Sonny has obvious problems, to gain deeper understanding of the story readers should also take the difficulties and troubles of his older brother into account.