

Sonny's blues by james baldwin | analysis



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“Sonny’s Blues” is a story authored by James Baldwin and published in 1957. The short story takes place in the center of civil rights movements in American society. Baldwin is considered an American activist, author, and play writer. Baldwin is also known for exploring cultural and societal issues owing from his experiences as an African American in America during the period of widespread racism and segregation. “Sonny’s Blues” touches on the life of Sonny’s character who is seen to undergo emotional pain and suffering in several years as an orphan and a drug addict in a poor neighborhood of African Americans (Claborn 94). However, as the title of the story goes, music forms the center of the short story. “Sonny’s Blues” was created in an African American setting, where music was growing and was apart of the culture. Through this, the author also goes ahead to explore the underlying theme of racism, which is evident in the text. This paper will analyze and explicate the text by Baldwin through the development and depiction of the theme of music presented in the short story.

“Sonny’s Blues” starts off with an unnamed narrator reading a newspaper. This narrator recently discovered the arrest of his younger brother for the accusations of selling and using heroin. The narrator goes ahead to describe a story of pain, prejudice, and suffering. Music plays out as the main theme in the story and gives readers an opportunity to relate by presenting a realistic point of view of Sonny’s elder brother, who dislikes the idea of his brother taking music on as a career. The setting of the story is significant and is well developed from beginning to end. The city of Harlem is of great importance because of the situation depicted in the 1950s whereby African Americans went through social issues such as poverty, drug abuse,

insecurity, violence, conflicts, prostitution, and the rise of the music culture (Claborn 92). Through the story, the author creates relevance and connection of different aspects ranging from characters, setting, and literary devices to bring forth the theme of music as depicted through "Sonny's Blues."

In the story two key characters, Sonny and the narrator, face several tribulations. Through conflicts with each other, the two main characters were able to realize how they both perceive music. Sonny is a musician and chosen music as a career, which he is also planning to take a full time course to further his skills. As stated in the short story, "I mean, I'll have a lot of studying to do, and I'll have to study everything" (Baldwin 31). The fact that the two characters are always in constant conflict and tension makes the theme of music more evident in the story and a controversial topic. After remembering his promise to his mother, the narrator felt it was his duty to keep Sonny in the right direction of life. This led him to try and change his idea of venturing into music as a career, while he thought there was more appealing careers out there one could accomplish for a living. Further, the author depicts music as a source of conflict between different characters in the short story, more so when Sonny was sent to live with his in-laws. Sonny did not welcome the idea, but reluctantly agreed to avoid another conflict, "you decided it, look brother, I don't want to stay Harlem no more, I really don't" (Baldwin 33). This clearly shows that Sonny is not interested in staying in Harlem due to the fact that his music career is under threat from his brother and other people who do not believe in him and music.

Sonny's life in his sister in-law's family creates conflict due to his behaviors and lack of commitment to his college studies. The conflict was created because Sonny had to hide the fact that he was studying music. The author also shows how music and Sonny's problems are attached, as trouble follows him whenever he goes. To avoid conflict Sonny decided to join the navy and disappear for a long time, which is also seen as a moment of peace in the story until his return from war. This also helps to show that as the main character of the story representing the life of an African American young man, Sonny's life is filled with the desire to make it in music, against society's backdrop which was highly associated with violence, drugs, and even insecurity. After Sonny's return from war, he met with his brother in New York. The meeting erupts into another fight whereby the narrator accused Sonny for making wrong life decisions, particularly drug abuse and the decision to become a pianist, which the narrator considered a waste of time. Each of the arguments and fights between the two central figures of the story revolves around music and the culture of drug abuse, which in turn builds up tension between the two throughout the story, " I gave up, I decided, if he didn't change his mind, that we could always talk about it later" (Baldwin 32). The arguments depict the fact that the older siblings misunderstood their younger siblings and tried to dictate and change who they actually are, more so concerning their careers. This helps to show the generational differences and perceptions of the emerging trends and the culture of music in the African American culture in the 1980s.

The story employs flashback to recall on the narrator's past life with the narrator's parents and how music served in the family through their father.

Through the narrator's flashback, we are able to find out that the narrator served in the army before becoming an algebra teacher, which according to him was an ideal career path and life decision compared to music. It is also evident that the narrator's mother had asked him to take care of Sonny, " I want to talk to you about your brother, if anything happens to me he ain't going to have nobody to look out for him" (Baldwin 26). Through this, we are able to tell that the narrator felt entitled to choose the life he wanted for Sonny. In the remembrance, the speaker also recollects how Sonny used to fight with his father since they were similar in many ways, particularly through music, " He and Sonny hadn't ever got too well, and this was partly because Sonny was the apple of his father's eye" (Baldwin 26). This helps to understand that music was bred in Sonny from a tender age. Through flashback, the author is also able to give the audience a picture of what happened before the beginning of the story and how music has been the center of the two brothers' constant misunderstandings. As noted from the story, the speaker's uncle was murdered by a white men who ran him over without any remorse. This helps to learn the depth of the conflict between the two brothers and its consequences as a result of not understanding and helping each other, which is a reflection of the narrator and Sonny's situation (Sherard 699). Additionally, the flashback in the story helps to show how the past is related to the present through the narrator's guiltiness of not helping Sonny in his desires to become a musician, which is also haunting him just like his father was haunted and traumatized by not helping his own brother. Throughout the story, darkness is used as a symbol to illustrate the threats and conflicts that grace the African American community's culture of music.

The narrator talks about his students concerning two types of darkness that is in their lives, which demonstrates his perceptions to youths and the emerging culture of music. The first type of darkness is the one that was closing in on their lives, and the one on the movies that is making them not see the other type of darkness (Clark 201). As a symbol in the story, darkness makes it possible for the readers to understand better the setting of the story and the situation in the African American neighborhood in America. This also shows how music was perceived by a rather older generation from that of Sonny's, which treasured music. The narrator laments that the dangers of darkness is the fact that the students cannot see looming danger ahead, as explained in the text, " drugs will do of them that algebra could" (Baldwin 18). As described, music is associated with darkness by the narrator because he does not see any future following a career in music and the fact that music is filled with immoral life, such as drug abuse.

Music is symbolized as an aspect that serves different factors and perceptions in the story. In the black society setting, particularly the 1950s on New York streets, music served as the foundation of African American population's culture. Jazz music was being revolutionized during this time and was most appreciated for its new attitude of the community bebop fans appreciated the new sound of music and the new attitude of the African American community (Fenfang & Tan 9). Therefore, " Sonny's Blues" was imperative in influencing and presenting the setting of the story. Music is also seen as an aspect that creates the generational difference and disparities between Sonny and the narrator, which are sources of conflict between the two. As evidenced in the story, the speaker does not like

Sonny's decision to sing jazz because he considers it a waste of time, "you mean, you want to be a drummer?" (Baldwin 30). It is through music that the narrator was able to realize Sonny's talent and value for music after visiting a night club and finding out how Sonny was valued and respected. Through this, the narrator was able to know that music acted as a unifying factor in the African American society as many people like Sonny had their own families out there who loved them.

From the story, it is through music that the narrator realizes Sonny's ability and value in life. For a long time, the narrator despised Sonny, particularly for his life decisions, such as taking music as a career, which he thought was useless. This was also the source of their argument and constant fighting, simply because the narrator could not find anything good with Sonny and his life choices. After accompanying Sonny to the performance, the narrator realizes how people adore him and for the first time, he was able to see Sonny being appreciated by many people for what he was doing. The narrator was also able to realize that Sonny was talented in music as opposed to his thoughts. Additionally, the narrator noted that Sonny's friends and fellow musicians were polite and respectful people, contrary to his perceptions about music as a culture and musicians, "I was introduced to all of Sonny's friends and they were polite people" (Baldwin 44). After Sony performed, the narrator saw how affectionate music was and was able to change his perception of music, owing to the love he saw Sonny feel at the club.

In conclusion, the author serves best in presenting several issues in society by his writing of the story "Sonny Blues." The story helps to understand the

type of life and suffering in African American neighborhoods in the 1950s motivated by factors such as race and racial discrimination, segregation, poverty, and violence. Additionally, the story through the use of literary skills brings out the struggles that were faced in families and associations in relation to moral values and familial responsibilities. The historical background that shapes up the setting of the story is relevant and perfect in presenting the relationship between characters and the contextual environment that forces them to behave the way they behave in the story. This therefore makes the story not only interesting, but relevant in the 1950s society.

Work Cited

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