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“Sonny’s Blues” Final Paper

James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” follows the path of an unidentified narrator and his younger brother named Sonny through their vast struggles to overcome suffering and racism in the heart of Harlem during the 1950’s. As an African American who has conformed to white culture, the narrator’s inability to connect with Sonny, who has taken more of an interest in black culture, becomes self-evident as they continue to never see eye to eye on almost anything. The intellectual literature expressed in “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin emphasizes elements of conflict, irony, and symbolism that coincide with the author’s personal experiences of radical racism and his belief in the power of artistic expression to create the theme of suffering.

The theme of how a person suffers is deeply rooted in the story “Sonny’s Blues.” At the beginning of the story, Sonny’s life is a dysfunctional mess as he tries to escape the countless hardships holding him back in life through the use of heroin. The narrator, Sonny’s older brother, reads about Sonny getting arrested during a raid in Harlem for peddling and using heroin. The narrator realizes that Sonny is being depicted as a criminal, but then he explains that Sonny is just a child who has made a couple of mistakes within his life. “I told myself that Sonny was wild, but he wasn't crazy. And he'd always been a good boy, he hadn't ever turned hard or evil or disrespectful, the way kids can, so quick, so quick, especially in Harlem” (Baldwin, 1). Sonny is facing a man vs. society external conflict, because society is depicting him as a criminal for breaking the law by peddling and using heroin, but the narrator views Sonny as a child that has made a few mistakes in life since he had always been a good boy when they were growing up together. Sonny’s use of heroin becomes more prevalent as the story progresses when Sonny explains to the narrator that he uses heroin as a means to escape the suffering and darkness surrounding his life. “Sonny uses drugs to keep from drowning in the suffering all humans have to go through. He explains that in order to gain anything or learn anything from the suffering, there needs to be a way to make it your own” (Wilson, 245). The setting throughout the course of the story mirrors Sonny’s constant failures to be able to escape suffering as well as his failure to connect and deal with society. When the narrator is reading about Sonny’s heroin addiction on the train, the setting becomes filled with darkness. “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, 1). Literally, the tunnels of the subway the narrator is on are filled with darkness, and the darkness symbolizes the hostile and racist environment of Harlem that is described in the story. Baldwin helps his audience understand that Sonny’s use of heroin, to escape the sorrows of living in Harlem, is a direct representation of how Sonny has tried to escape suffering instead of dealing with it head on like he does with jazz music later on in the story. “There is no escape from the darkness for Sonny and his family. Dreams and aspirations are always dispelled, the narrator comments, because ‘someone will always get up and turn on the light.’ ‘and when the light fills the room’ he continues, ‘the child is filled with darkness’” (Murray, 354). After the narrator reads about Sonny’s struggles with heroin abuse in the newspaper, the narrator begins to imagine that his students are doing heroin in the bathroom before coming to class. The narrator wonders if heroin is guiding his algebra students even better than he can do as a teacher. “I was talking about algebra to a lot of boys who might, every one of them for all I knew, be popping off needles every time they went to the head. Maybe it did more for them than algebra could” (Baldwin, 1). Situational irony presents itself in this scene as the narrator, a teacher, claims that heroin can guide his students even better than he can. As an algebra teacher, the narrator’s job is to guide students to success within an educational environment, but situational irony presents itself since the narrator is claiming that heroin can guide his students more than he can. Realistically, algebra should be better for students in an educational environment than heroin, but in this particular situation the narrator claims otherwise. Heroin acts as a comforting route to escape the miseries of the tragic day to day life that Sonny is living instead of dealing with these problems and overcoming the darkness surrounding the bitterness of life in Harlem. The narrator on the other hand cannot understand his brother’s actions, as he tries to compare them to that of his students. Obviously, suffering is not something Sonny can run away from by using heroin, and it is not something the narrator can understand, because he is in denial of his own suffering.

As Baldwin’s short story progresses, the narrator tries to act as a role model for Sonny in an attempt to guide his actions toward a brighter future away from heroin abuse and what he sees as childish choices, but the narrator fails to guide Sonny, because he is detached from his own emotional feelings and in denial of his own suffering. Throughout the course of the story, the narrator is in a state of denial about his own suffering mirroring Sonny’s attempts to escape suffering. It is evident that the narrator doesn’t understand how to help Sonny since he is hiding from the harsh realities of life. “By using the form of the story to bring the narrator to confront reality, Baldwin suggests that the narrator's denial parallels both Sonny's art and his drug use as a way of attempting to manage pain and suffering” (Norton, 181). When the narrator’s mother died in the story, he promised her that he would be there to help guide Sonny in the right direction no matter how much they fought with each other. “‘You got to hold on to your brother,’ she said, ‘and don't let him fall, no matter what it looks like is happening to him and no matter how evil you gets with him’” (Baldwin, 12). The narrator fails to keep this promise giving a clear representation of how he was suppose to be the responsible older brother to Sonny and guide him in the right direction. The narrator presents his internal conflict within the story after breaking his promise to guide Sonny, because the narrator didn’t want to see Sonny going down the wrong path or be a part of his life to help guide him in the right direction, but the narrator also wanted to keep the promise he made to his mother to help guide Sonny as the older brother. “I didn't want to believe that I'd ever see my brother going down, coming to nothing, all that light in his face gone out, in the condition I'd already seen so many others” (Baldwin, 1). The narrator wanted to be the responsible older brother to help guide Sonny down the right path to keep his promise, but he also didn’t want to be a part of Sonny’s life or have any emotional connection with Sonny as he claims “I kept it out of me for a long time” (Baldwin, 1). The narrator shows the audience that he is blocking out his emotional connection to his own flesh and blood which shows he has a problem dealing with his own suffering. The narrator’s promise to his mother is also an important aspect in his emotional disconnection. The mother is literally a voice in the narrator’s head, because she has passed away and he is carrying the thought of her with him. Symbolically, failing to keep his promise after the mother’s death leaves the narrator with a guilty conscience realizing that he did not obey his mother’s wishes and he is now suffering the consequences by having to connect with his emotional side again to help Sonny. The narrator denies his own suffering once again when his daughter dies. The narrator’s daughter, Grace, faces a man vs. mother nature external conflict when she dies from polio, because polio is an infectious viral disease found in nature that causes paralysis, spasms, and even death which forces the narrator once again to deny his emotional state of mind instead of confronting the innermost sorrow deeply rooted in the major theme of suffering. “Little Grace died in the fall. She was a beautiful little girl. But she only lived a little over two years. She died of polio and she suffered” (Baldwin, 18). Due to the loss of his daughter, the narrator shows that he is still unable to deal with his suffering and emotional disconnection with other people since he doesn’t confront the sorrowful loss of his daughter. Literally, Grace is vulnerable, parlayed, and dead forcing the narrator to uncover those inner emotions to reconnect with Sonny as a role model. Symbolically, the narrator has shown that he has lost his grace. He doesn’t know that his inability to be innocent and vulnerable is also paralyzed, so he must find a way to become graceful again. He must find inner strength to become forgiving and vulnerable to help his brother instead of denying his overall suffering. “I think I may have written Sonny the very day that little Grace was buried. I was sitting in the living room in the dark, by myself, and I suddenly thought of Sonny. My trouble made his real” (Baldwin, 18). This is the narrator’s first step at reconnecting with his brother and embracing his emotional side. “The way that the brothers interact begins to change for the better after she dies because, as critic James Tackach points out, ‘when the narrator loses his daughter Grace, he simultaneously identiﬁes with the pain and darkness in Sonny’s life and realizes his own loss of grace’” (Stone, 253). Eventually, the narrator does finally figure out how to deal with his emotional side and deal with his innermost sorrows. In the beginning of the story, we would expect that a teacher who is suppose to guide students would eventually guide his heroin addicted brother to the path in which he would deal with the suffering in his life, but this is not the case, because the narrator is in denial of his own suffering, making it impossible for him to guide Sonny. It is Sonny who learns how to deal with his own suffering, thus making him the teacher, and the narrator the student. This in turn creates situational irony, because we would expect the narrator to guide Sonny, not the other way around. Sonny uses the power of artistic expression to teach and guide the narrator on a path in which he would learn that he can never escape suffering, but he must learn how to deal with it. “I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise” (Baldwin, 27). The narrator finally catches up to Sonny in order to realize that people can never escape suffering, but they must finally deal with the harsh realities of life.

The story of how the narrator and Sonny suffer coincides with their cultural differences and directly relates to how they conform within society. The narrator has taken a predominately white cultural standpoint within society, while Sonny on the other hand is embracing black cultural views within society. As a person who has conformed predominately more toward embracing white culture, the narrator shows his audience by picking a job where he can guide and instruct African-Americans, that he does not align with the stereotypical views of African American culture. The narrator has also left his students and his brother to suffer the way white society would within Harlem in the 1950’s. The narrator emphasizes that he has also changed his views about music, and his views about black people in general thus escaping or disconnecting from the reigns of black culture. “It might be said, perhaps, that I had escaped, after all, I was a school teacher; or that Sonny had, he hadn't lived in Harlem for years” (Baldwin,7). Sonny’s character emphasizes that he has embraced his African-American culture by being influenced by jazz music, stereotypical heroin addiction that most blacks faced in 1950s Harlem, and being comforted by the black community in the jazz club. “Here, I was in Sonny's world. Or, rather: his kingdom. Here, it was not even a question that his veins bore royal blood” (Baldwin, 25). The cultural differences experienced by the brothers directly relates back to how they view society and this in turn leads to conflict. A man vs. man external conflict arises between the narrator and Sonny, since Sonny wants to embrace black culture by learning the piano so he can become a blues musician, but the narrator wants Sonny to focus on conforming to white culture by forcing Sonny to finish school. “‘We already decided that you was going to go and live at Isabel's. Now what's got into you all of a sudden?’ ‘You decided it,’ he pointed out. ‘I didn't decide nothing.’” (Baldwin, 15). Cultural differences between the two brothers create a gap in their relationship, making it difficult for either one of them to see each other’s point of view. At the end of Baldwin’s short story, the narrator listens to Sonny’s interconnection with the blues and how he deals with suffering. The narrator embraces Sonny’s version of artistic expression even though the blues is deeply rooted in African American culture. The author makes it a point to show his audience that the brothers need to indulge in white and black culture. At the end of the story, the narrator orders Sonny a scotch and milk which is seen trembling on top of the piano when Sonny plays the blues. Literally, the glass that is trembling on top of the piano is filled with white milk and dark scotch that never falls even when Sonny continues to play the piano. Symbolically, the glass of milk and scotch resemble the cultural differences in the two brother’s lives, and how they must have a connection to both white and black culture in order to create stabilization in their lives. The narrator, who has taken the pure white approach within society, shows the audience that he is not doing a very good job living in the white world, since he is emotionally disconnected from his family, his students, and other black people within society. The narrator doesn’t understand black culture and often complains about it throughout the story. “The narrator is an algebra teacher in a New York high school. His success in assimilating into the white-dominated society separates him from his brother and a world that ‘filled everything, the people, the houses, the music, the dark, quicksilver barmaid, with the menace [that] was their reality’” (Hicks, 3). Sonny who has taken the pure black approach, is immersed within his culture, but lacks the organizational structure that his brother possesses within the pure white approach. The cup trembling on top of the piano clearly symbolizes, that the brother’s both need to mix their approaches. The all white approach and all black approach clearly don’t work for either of them. The mixing of scotch and milk or more simply the mixing of both the white and black approach will create stabilization. The cup may tremble on the piano, but it never falls because it contains both the white approach and the black approach lacking in their lives. “For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling” (Baldwin, 28). Situational irony presents itself at the end of the story as well, since black culture which the narrator seems to not understand throughout the rest of the story, actually helps him understand that he needs to deal with the suffering in his own life and acts as a way to bring the brother’s closer together. “In ‘Sonny's Blues,’ the blues becomes the instrument that helps rebuild relationships, either of the self or with others” (Hicks, 5). The narrator takes a job as a teacher guiding African-American children, feels empathy for black people, and feels he is above the culture completely. At the end of the story, the narrator listens to jazz music, which is deeply rooted in black culture, to finally understand that he must embrace both cultures and deal with his internal suffering. The audience would expect the narrator to continue to misunderstand black culture, since he feels above it, but the outcome is essentially different since Sonny’s use of black cultural music helps the narrator clear his mind and he finds comfort in listening to Sonny’s song. “He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air” (Baldwin, 27). The cultural differences between the narrator and his brother Sonny clearly help explain that no matter what approach either of them takes to escape suffering, they will never escape, because they need to learn how to implement both approaches in order to survive the difficult realities of life.

Throughout the course of his literary narrative “Sonny’s Blues”, James Baldwin focuses the essence of his story around the narrator’s younger brother, Sonny. Sonny is characterized by Baldwin to express his belief in the power of art and literary expression. As a young man, connecting to the roots of black culture for the first time, Sonny resembles a free spirit finding a path to express his innermost sorrows. The plot of the story follows Sonny through his many spontaneous decisions and actions including his use of heroin, joining the navy, and beginning his interest in jazz music. Sonny’s expression of black culture through jazz music is not understood by his brother. Sonny’s brother, who has conformed more to white culture, believes Sonny is making a mistake in pursuing a music career. A man vs. man external conflict arises between Sonny and his brother, because Sonny expresses to his elder brother that he wants to become a jazz musician, but his brother wants Sonny to think about his future instead of wasting his time with jazz music and explains not all people can do exactly what they want. “‘Well, Sonny,’ I said gently, ‘you know people can't always do exactly what they want to do’ ‘No, I don't know that,’ said Sonny, surprising me. ‘I think people ought to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?’ (Baldwin, 14). Sonny’s love for art directly represents Baldwin’s belief in the power of artistic expression. Baldwin uses Sonny as a means of introducing this idea to his audiences. Jazz music is repeatedly explained through Sonny’s actions within the story. Sonny’s life is disorganized throughout the story, as he tries to find his groove within society. Toward the end of the story, Sonny struggles to find his groove again on the piano while playing the blues. After some improvisations, it seems like Sonny is finally starting to find his groove while playing the piano in front of a small crowd. Jazz is literally an instrumental form of music rooted from the blues that specifically emphasizes stories about loss, depression, and tragedy faced throughout people’s lives. Jazz is also a form of artistic expression that generally sounds extremely chaotic to many listeners since it is hard to follow, and tends to skip around a lot. Symbolically, Sonny’s life mirrors the disorganization of jazz music since his life is equally chaotic, tending to skip around from heroin use, to joining the navy, to playing the piano creating a path that does not appear to follow any particular order, but more importantly, jazz music becomes a symbol that lets Sonny deal with the one thing that he has been trying to get away from his entire life, suffering. “Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did” (Baldwin, 27). Sonny’s use of freedom and expression through jazz music helps him deal with the suffering he is facing within his life, and Baldwin emphasizes that Sonny’s use of art is the main reason why he can do this. “As an artist, he has found a way to transcend tragedy; he not only uses the blues as an outlet for feeling and as an expression of his states of mind, but he also shares and communicates those feelings and in the process, makes his music into an affirmation of life” (Flibbert, 1031). The narrators understanding of suffering at the end of the story also presents dramatic irony, since he does not understand the point of jazz music at the beginning of the story, claiming it is beneath him and for goodtime people. “I had never thought about it before, had never been forced to, but I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called ‘goodtime people’” (Baldwin, 13). The narrator is ignorant about the idea of Sonny becoming a musician since it seems childish to him, but Sonny on the other hand is serious about the idea despite his brother’s ignorance. The dramatic irony presents itself as the narrator listens to Sonny’s musical expression and learns the most serious aspect of the blues, which is dealing with the suffering within his own life. Despite the narrator’s accusations about jazz music being childish, he finally sees that the joke is on him now, because the one thing he criticized, helped him learn the most important lesson in his life on how to deal with his own suffering and that jazz is deeply rooted in the tale of how we suffer rather than a way for “goodtime people” to escape their problems like he previously mentioned prior to hearing Sonny’s blues. While the narrator listens to Sonny’s blues he realizes that the world is full of suffering, and that unlike his statement about goodtime people, jazz music is Sonny’s way of dealing with the suffering that is inescapable in a world full of hardships. “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, 28). The story of suffering is present throughout the lives of all people and Sonny has shown his audience that they can deal with it through the powerful manifestations of artistic expression. Baldwin explains, “the view that suffering and sorrow are inevitable is, of course, the tragic view of life” (Flibbert, 1030). Baldwin emphasizes that suffering will never cease to exist, but there is always a way to deal with the deeply rooted pains in life, and for Sonny, artistic expression lets him triumph above the sorrows in his life.

“Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin tells the story of two brothers, while along their path through bitter suffering, learned how to overcome and deal with the tragedies that define the unforgiving sorrow within their lives through artistic expression. Baldwin’s literary writing style, portraying the themes of suffering and the power of artistic expression using symbolism, irony, and conflict, all derive from his first-hand experience suffering and using the ultimate power of literary writing to escape within his short story, “Sonny’s Blues”.

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