Effect Of James Baldwin's Biographical Story On The Short Story "Sonny's Blues"

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James Baldwin is a renowned American novelist, essayist, playwright, and the vice behind the American Civil Rights Movement who wrote a collection of essays titled "Notes of A Native son", "The Fire Next Time", and "Nobody Knows My Name" among others. His compositions explore sexual, racial and classical differences in the Western world, especially in America in the 20th century (Baldwin 67).

Baldwin's Early Life and Literary Reputation

In 1924, James was born in New York City and lived in France until when he met his death in Saint-Paul de Vance on 1st December 1987. The novel is "Go tell it On the Mountain" which recognized his insights on spirituality, race, and humanity (Baldwin 83) is among his most recognized literary works.

Sonny's Blues as Autobiographical Reflection

In an equally famous story, Sonny Blues, James Baldwin narrates what seems to be a reflection of his lifestyle. This is evident in the theme, setting, characters of the story, and more, as well as the fact that it is written in the first-person narrative.

Family Identity and the Unnamed Narrator

There are definite times in Sonny's Blues where the lives of both the narrator and Sonny correspond with those of James Baldwin. The setting of the story is from James' childhood. Moreover, the fact that the narrator chooses not to mention his name anywhere while the other characters are known by their familial positions shows Baldwin's feelings regarding his place in his family. He was the oldest and the only child who didn't share biological parents in the family. Hence, he writes, "one writes out of one thing only experience" (Baldwin, 42).

Harlem as the Biographical Setting

The story is set in Harlem, New York, during the 1950s. It talks about a neighbourhood that is predominantly African American, troubled with racism, poverty-stricken and full of violence. Since James was born and raised in Harlem, he was no stranger to the vices of that society, hence the story "Sonny's Blues". The story explores childhood, drugs, prostitution, jazz music, church, family, school, and prison, among others.

Heroin and the Neighborhood's Destruction

In Sonny's Blues, Sonny doesn't come to school because he is in prison for selling and using heroin. His friend tells the narrator that he is going to be detoxified while in jail, after which he will be set free. This identifies with the drug that infested Harlem, where James Baldwin grew up. Furthermore, Sonny's old friend is always dirty and high. The narrator pities and, at the same time, hates him because he is not different from Sonny.

Church, Violence, and Baldwin's Friends

In James''s autobiography, "A letter from a Region in My mind", he discovered the church and became involved in it. He says the fear of violent death in Harlem streets is what led him to get involved in church. James also talks about how his father was trying to get him to church while his friends were out there discovering Harlem for what it was. He describes how his friends were busy downtown, caring less about their looks, dress codes and character as they went on drinking sprees (Baldwin,20). Also, James narrates how the neighbourhood changed his friends and turned them into bad habits, just as it happens in Sonny's Blues. That quote from his autobiography can be directly linked to a scenario in Sonny's Blues when the narrator was in his classroom, and he could hear the boys (his students) shouting and cursing at each other in the hallways.

Harlem's Influence on Sonny and Baldwin's Peers

In the mini-autobiography, Baldwin talks about how Harlem changed his friends and those around him. This is what precisely happens to the narrator's brother in Sonny's Blues. After discovering his brother was locked up because he was busted in a raid with heroin, the narrator starts to think about his younger brother. The narrator remembers that "Sonny was wild, but he wasn't crazy, he's always been a good kid, he hadn't ever turned hard or evil, or disrespectful, the way kids can so quickly in Harlem." The narrator reflects on how different his brother was from the 'bad kids.' He then continues saying, "I didn't want to believe that I'd see my brother going down, coming to nothing…in the condition, I'd already seen so many others" (Baldwin 64). Even though the story is fictional, the author, who grew up in Harlem, has witnessed how people came to destruction living in Harlem.

Two Responses to Black Life in America

The characters in Sonny's Blues are a reflection of how Baldwin viewed African Americans. During his childhood, there was a lot of racial tension, and there were what Baldwin believed to be two types of African Americans. He uses the two main characters of Sonny's Blue to represent these two types of African Americans during the civil rights movement. The narrator of the story is the type he criticizes in many of his writings. The narrator is a teacher who has managed to get away from the darkness of Harlem and establish himself, which gives him prestige and sets him apart from other African Americans. The narrator, being a school teacher, manages to distance himself from his community and tries to become like the white community, forgetting that he is still black and is looked at just like that. While Sonny represents the opposite of that, he describes the African Americans who have been through the struggle and have accepted that and refuse to be blind to it (Baldwin 72).

Broken Families and Baldwin's Childhood

The family structure displayed In Sonny's Blues seems to be broken down. The narrator talks of how he brings Sonny from prison and asks him to stay with his wife's family, with time they got misunderstandings with his sister-in-law for skipping school, and later he moves out to join the navy. In a flashback, the narrator also highlights how the two brothers used to fight with their father and amongst themselves. One particular fight ended up with Sonny asking his brother to consider him dead. The narrator left with the belief that Sonny, at one point, will need his help. This relates to Baldwin's childhood when he was born to a single mother who later married David Baldwin, his stepfather's father, who later adopted him.

Father-Son Favoritism

Although James was both obedient and intelligent both in school and at home, he was the least favourite compared to his other siblings. This relates to James' literary works where, in most cases, one child is favoured more than the other. In Sonny's Blues, the narrator speaks of a rocky relationship between Sonny and his father. He further states that "Sonny was the apple of his father's eye", he goes on to say "he loved Sonny so much and was frightened for him" (Baldwin 33). However, the narrator doesn't speak of his relationship with his father.

Racial Trauma and Exile

Baldwin also suffered many of the alienation and misfortunes that most of the characters in Sonny's Blues underwent. Significant among these was racial segregation. He fled from the United States to France in 1948 in a bid to get some relief from the kind of racism that he was experiencing. He went on to live in France for the remainder of his life, though he would return to the United States so often.

In Sonny's Blues, the narrator's mother asks him to watch out for his brother. She told him about the story of their father as a young man when he watched his brother run over by a car full of white men who never bothered to stop. It consequently traumatized the father and damaged the rest of his life (Campbell 87).

Darkness as a Symbol of Harlem

Baldwin also goes ahead to speak of the people, Harlem itself and the darkness of itself, which represents the sorrow and poverty that both brothers are living in. The story opens with the dark images of his brother's arrest. He says he feels "trapped in the darkness that roared outside" (Baldwin 5). The theme of darkness is further explored in the introduction of the family's routine Sunday activities. Instead of being a happy and fulfilling time, the narrator often refers to the "darkness" which has settled over everyone.

Death and Persistent Suffering

The story is full of tragedies that keep darkness hanging over the character's heads. While Sonny is in prison, his daughter succumbs to polio. Also, the story that their mother told them about their father watching his brother being run over by a car full of white men who never bothered to stop portrays more the theme of tragedy and death.

Music, Drugs, and the Brothers' Diverging Paths

The story highlights the differences between the two brothers. Their seven-year age difference had an impact on their choices and behaviour. Sonny chose to abuse heroin and jazz music, whereas the narrator decided to be an algebra teacher. Musically, the narrator prefers old jazz music, whereas Sonny relates to the latest version of Bebop. This is evidenced when Sonny gets offended by his brother mentioning Armstrong's name, which he corrects as a Charlie Parker fanatic. However, Savery asserts that the difference between Armstrong and Parker signifies something bigger than just a different type of music. Sonny is drawn to Parker because he suffered a similar demise of drug and alcohol abuse just like him.

Historical Forces Shaping Harlem

Baldwin lived in a time when there was rampant depression, World War 11, the Civil Rights Movement, and the vast migration of African Americans to the North. All these affected Harlem significantly. It led to poverty, poor choices of alcohol and drug abuse, racism, and ultimately, no sense of hope for the African Americans. Likewise, in Sonny's Blues, the two brothers grew up in a poor, predominantly black community, Harlem. The lifestyle they lived was full of poverty and lack,

just like the life James lived in his time (Baldwin 39).

Education Without Economic Escape

While the narrator seems to have everything right in life, his circumstances and material life have not changed. He continues to live in the housing projects with his family as he used to when he was growing up. The narrator has completed college, has served in the military, and is now teaching algebra in a local school, but his financial status has not changed much. Similarly, in James' later life, he used to travel so often from France back to the United States for Civil Rights Movement talks to earn a living. James also did all sorts of odd jobs to support his writing career, which was not progressing well (Campbell 65).

Self-Discovery Through Addiction, Faith, and Art

The theme of self-discovery is also evident in the story. The two brothers not only discover about themselves but also about each other throughout their lives. Sonny's outstanding questionable action is his drug usage. He suffers the consequences of being a heroin addict on the streets but also serves a jail sentence, during which time he tells his brother that he would instead "blow my brains out rather than go through this again"(Baldwin 54). However, it is a result of this jail time that he returns to society drug-free and unites again with his estranged brother after years of their rocky relationship. From the age of 14 to 16, Baldwin was an active preacher in a small revivalist church. It is around this particular time that he wrote his most beautiful novel, "Go Tell it On the Mountain" (Baldwin 25). After his high school graduation, he began a period of self-study, a literary apprenticeship in Greenwich Village and a series of ill-paid jobs. All this was in a bid to discover and develop him.

Betrayal, Mistrust, and Fraternal Responsibility

Moreover, the effect of Sonny's drug choices equally affects his older brother. The narrator feels responsible for the person Sonny has turned out to be since he promised his mother before her passing on to always look out for him. Instead of supporting Sonny's musical dream, he turned his back on him because he did not help his artistic vision. It portrays the kind of Harlem, a place where James grew up. It also brings out the themes of betrayal, mistrust, and the injustices that were taking place in that particular society.

First-Person Narrative as Personal Testimony

The fact that Baldwin chose Harlem, where he grew up and had fond memories, is evidence enough to show that he wanted to tell his story. Furthermore, his choice of words and employment of the first-person narrative implies that he intended to tell the story himself. There was no better way of putting

it than saying it in the first person and portraying vices that had infested Harlem, which he witnessed while growing up and had first-hand information.

Rage and Limited Opportunity

There is a prevalent theme of fury and rage. Throughout the story, the narrator repeatedly asserts the concealed anger of the Harlem community. It portrays both external and internal conflicts that haunt the characters. Fury and anger and products that came with being African American with limited opportunities within their community. At the beginning of the story, the narrator discovers that his students are ”filled with rage” (Baldwin 54). They know they have limited opportunities, and knowledge breeds a destructive internal rage that threatens to destroy their lives. Having nowhere to go, they turn their anger onto themselves, which leads to a life of darkness (Lemming 62).

Music as an Outlet for Fury

The narrator also observes a ”furious” man dropping change into a church bucket. Fury is evident everywhere in Harlem’s daily life, even in the revivals that are held on the streets. It is a fury instigated by desire and desperation, and it finds its form of expression in Sonny’s music that he plays as the story ends. Although it is difficult and painful, it makes Sonny’s jazz music possible. It also gives life to religious revival, which Sonny passes on the streets (Troupe 59).

Despair and the Limits of Respectability

There is apparent suffering in the Harlem community marked by despair. This was influenced or also seen in James’ upbringing, whereby he grew up suffering. It is evidenced by the narrator confessing that he is not surprised by Sonny’s fate. He further admits that he is guilty of not working to prevent Sonny’s fate. The narrator seems to be separated from the suffering caused by drugs, and he realizes that his job and virtuous life have not brought him relief from the pain around him (Troupe, 68).

Family and Community Responsibility

In Sonny’s Blues, there is also a blurred distinction between blood relatives and community members. This is seen when the narrator mistakes Sonny’s childhood friend for Sonny. He asks the narrator for money, which he reluctantly gives him. He dislikes him because he is usually high and dirty-looking. When the narrator sees him that day, he realizes that he suddenly despises him. This man is not related to the narrator and his brother. He comes to make sure the narrator knows what happened to his brother Sonny.

Baldwin’s Life Within Sonny’s Blues

In conclusion, James Baldwin writes about his real-life experiences of childhood, school times, family life, racism, violence, poverty, fury, and rage. Harlem community, which he lived in at the time, was infested with all those vices, and he successfully portrays them in the story Sonny’s Blues (Campbell 55).

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