Sonny’s Blues By James Baldwin

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Introduction

The short story “Sonny’s Blues” was published for the first time in Partisan Review in the year 1957. This story is a narrative about a mathematics teacher whose brother became a drug addict and a musician. In this story, the author, James Baldwin, describes how both brothers faced racial discrimination due to their African American origin. The discrimination affected both brothers differently and changed their ways of thinking. Sonny, who chose to be a musician, started using drugs and is explained negatively by the narrator. In contrast, his older brother grew up to be intelligent and chose to be a mathematician. The story opens with the location of Harlem, where the two brothers live, a city with a high crime rate. The narrator in this story seems to be biased towards white culture; he feels the pain and suffering of Sonny but chooses to ignore it. At the start of the story, the narrator describes how Sonny got arrested due to drug use charges against him. The writer seems to have absorbed the white society, but the pain he observes in Sonny’s life is soon seen in the narration as the story progresses. The prompt of this essay is to understand the role of suffering in the narrative and how James Baldwin finally understood the reason behind his brother’s drug addiction, after which he thinks that Sonny was justified in being an addict to relieve pain.

Discussion

The author in the story uses a narrative theme to provide his concept. The narrative explains that he comes to know about Sonny’s convictions in the newspaper and media, where serious allegations of drug use are made against him. According to the narrative, Sonny does not expect such behaviour, and he contradicts himself repeatedly, trying to convince himself that this behaviour does not belong to his brother. The narrative uses the theme of suffering, and the whole story has continued references to the pain that Sonny faced. The title of the story “Sonny’s Blues” also has a connection with the pain that the narrative wants to point to, as the term “Blues” is used both to describe unhappiness and the type of music that Sonny opted for in his career, which is a kind of sad jazz music.

The narrative provides evidence as to why he thinks that Sonny can never get involved in drug activities. This seems to have first denied the concept of Sonny’s case but then starts providing evidence on how easy it is in Harlem to get affected by the wrong culture of this area and how kids are affected by peer pressure and negativity in Harlem’s cruel environment. The narrator then accepts the fact that Sonny is actually guilty of the crime, which motivates him to believe that every boy in Harlem is equally likely to develop negative skills and become a criminal as the environment is

so criminal-friendly.

The narrator describes in the story the origin of the suffering that Sonny had since his childhood. Since early childhood, Sonny faced discrimination in his school because of his race and background. Their poverty and the conditions they lived through during their childhood explain the hardships they went through during their childhood. The narrator feels sad that the cruel environment of Harlem consumed his brother and refers to the environment as "darkness that roared outside".

Baldwin's story revolves around different types of suffering he and Sonny went through since their childhood. The idea of suffering is dominant in the story. It seems that every character, the narrator, Sonny, his father, and his mother, suffered from harsh realities in their own way. His father, David Baldwin, the most affected by his brother's death by white drunkards, developed a hate for the white race when he was devastated by his brother's sudden death. The suffering his father went through changed his very perception of life, and the death of his brother haunted him till his last breath.

"...Your father says he heard his brother scream when the car rolled over him, and he heard the wood of that guitar when it gives, and he heard them strings go flying, and he heard them white men shouting, and the car kept on a-going and it ain't stopped till this day. And, time your father got down the hill, his brother wasn't nothing but blood and pulp." (Baldwin, pp. 29)

Suffering never spared his mother, either. She tries her best to support her husband and comfort him after his brother's death, but she too is lost seeing her husband suffer so much, and it becomes unbearable for her to survive with her pain. The narrator also shares his mother's views about his father and how he helped her in every critical time of her life and supported her. But after the death of his brother, his father's hope seems to have been lost, and his pain broke his wife.

Suffering can also be seen in the efforts of Baldwin's mother, who tried her level best to keep her boys safe from the savageness of Harlem and tried to make a living despite the pain of her husband. She advised James Baldwin to take care of his younger brother no matter what evil happens to you and never leave each other.

"...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 get with him. You are going to be evil with him many a time. But don't you forget what I told you, you hear?"

The narrator describes that he encounters a friend of Sonny after his arrest who told him that he could not help Sonny anymore, which made him angry as he forgot what his mother used to say about sticking together and taking care of each other.

For Sonny, the life of Harlem, the savage realities of life, his uncle's, father's, and mother's deaths and the great amount of racial hate he got all his life were enough suffering as a kid. Despite choosing a respectable life, he became a drug addict and was sent to prison for his crimes. The narrator, who was against Sonny's heroin usage, understood the reason why his brother got addicted

to it. He realized that Sonny found no option but to suppress his suffering artificially as the level of stress he bore during all these years and the incidents broke his will and ability to do something better in life. While sitting in the bar after he got released, Sonny told his brother:

"...what heroin feels like sometimes when it's in your veins. It makes you feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And- and sure." He sipped his beer, very deliberately not looking at me. I watched his face. "It makes you feel in control. Sometimes, you've got to have that feeling."

The narrator understood that what he thought to be a bad influence from Harlem's criminal activities, the actual reason for Sonny's heroin usage was to overcome that suffering. Sonny describes to his brother that everyone who suffers has to find a way to overcome his stress and that he found heroin to be helpful to him in that way. Though he realized this drug use would kill him, he said that it was helping him overcome that suffering by providing control.

Sonny's interest in jazz music also aimed to find an escape from his suffering. The type of music he became interested in is known to have been used by musicians to explain their true selves. Sonny found jazz music as a cure for his suffering by expressing what he felt in his songs and truly expressing what he believed. His interest in jazz music was felt by the narrator to be a positive thing, at least better than heroin, to overcome his suffering. The narrator describes the day when he went to the jazz club with Sonny, where he played the piano. He described the scene with the words "filled the air with life, his life," which points to the miserable life Sonny had since childhood, a life of incompleteness and constant pain.

"...Then they all gathered around Sonny, and Sonny played. Every now and again, one of them seemed to say, Amen. Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his."

Conclusion

The story Sonny's Blues describes the harsh realities of life and how difficult it can be to live without the supervision of parents. The savage environment that the narrator and his brother lived in was rich with racial hate and crimes, and it became one reason for their dad's suffering and pain. James Baldwin tried to explain the reality that suffering is inescapable, and no matter how much a person tries to be strong, it eventually breaks him. The prolonged suffering consumes the person, and the person, when he gives up in front of the pain, seeks refuge in other things which sometimes are harmful to him.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. Sonny's Blues. Ernst Klett Sprachen, 2009.