
Theme of Suffering in "Sonny's Blues"

Humans are made of the tangible; flesh and blood, muscles and bones, cells and nerves. The survival of man can be dissected into the purely scientific, the emotionless, the artless. The value of the anatomical can clearly not be understated, as such is the basest foundation of existence. However, when unaccompanied by that which offers grace and solace, joy and purpose, and, above all else, love and understanding, this foundation grants only that: existence. A limp, dispassionate meandering through life at it's most stripped bare is a weak prospect, and yet it is the only one facing the character of Sonny in James Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues*, should he follow in the wake of his older brother.

While there are those who condemn Sonny's drug use as an exemplification of pathetic weakness, it is much more than that; it is the overture of a child in the dark, grasping at a flicker of light which he knows to be false, but he grasps at anyway because he so desperately needs something to clutch in his otherwise empty fist. Sonny is not the same as his older brother; his soul is not the same. Sonny has an artist's soul, an artist's suffering. Baldwin delineates Sonny as a character who does not have an alternative to drugs, as a tragic hero with an artist's soul, by means of Sonny's suffering and his home.

Throughout *Sonny's Blues*, Baldwin illustrates the notion of suffering as hovering inescapably above all of his characters; each one suffers in some way – from grief, from poverty, from addiction, from limited opportunities in life. All of the characters certainly experience agony, but none of them experience salvation, though they all look for it in their own ways. Sonny's brother does so by starting a family, having a career, and creating a home. However, despite the unequivocal worth of such, none of this offers the brother salvation; he still lives in a Harlem housing project that makes him wonder as he brings Sonny home if he is "simply bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape" (Baldwin 840). He, whom is not stranded in the thrashing sea of addiction, is not free. He makes the decisions that he believes are best for him, and it is easy to look upon these choices and wonder why Sonny does not make them as well, why he chooses heroin. Sonny and his brother are not the same, their suffering and their souls are too different, and they necessitate different means of coping. "Heroin...when it [is] in [the] veins...makes [one] feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant...and sure...it makes [one] feel in control...it [is] to stand it, to be able to make it at all. On any level...in order to keep from shaking to pieces" (853-854). This is the sensation Sonny is addicted to, the only weak semblance of solace he finds. The tragic irony is that Sonny finds this facade of consolation in music, his passion, but a passion tainted by vice. This only perpetuates his suffering.

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In *Sonny's Blues*, Baldwin closely links the themes of suffering and the home. The home is a physical place in *Sonny's Blues*, but it is also an idea. It is a place to escape from, a place to return to, a place with both horrible and wonderful memories. Home is comfort, conflict, grief, suffering, and caring all combined. It is an apartment and it is a nightclub. Its residents are both actual and created family. Home is literal but it is also symbolic, since in many ways home is simply the feeling that one belongs. The nightclub where Sonny plays the piano is "his kingdom. Here, it [is] not even a question that his veins bore royal blood" (860). The nightclub is truly Sonny's "home" now. He is comfortable here, in his element. He has created a home for himself outside of the place where he sleeps and eats, where he is accepted and admired, and that transforms the nightclub from a den of music and vice and the manifestations of an artist's soul into Sonny's home. However, this is a home shared with fellow addicts, people who get high to play music, who are inherently inviting of more suffering at the hands of addiction. Outside of this home, "the world wait[s] outside, as hungry as a tiger, and...trouble stretch[es] above [them], longer than the sky" (863). Nonetheless, this home gives Sonny a genuine feeling of peace, with himself and the world, however temporary. Its music gives him tranquility, and, despite all of his suffering, it also paradoxically holds the ability to help Sonny overcome his addiction. One of the many tragedies of Sonny is that his home offers him no real guarantees; like all homes it can both wound and heal, but to a possibly fatal extent when the wounding is done by addicts and heroin.

Throughout *Sonny's Blues*, Baldwin works to establish suffering as intrinsic to human life. He states that all people approach their pain and suffering in their own ways, that there is no given formula for addressing grievance. The character of Sonny resorts to heroin in an attempt to soothe his internal poison, but the devastating result is the agony of addiction, for both himself and those that love him. Despite this, Sonny works to overcome his tribulations, particularly through his created home, the place of his music and like-minded friends-turned-kin. This determination to surmount his addiction, always while being fully aware of his pain, makes Sonny into a tragic hero, attempting to live honestly according to a soul that is all his own, not his brother's; the soul of an artist.

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