

Sonny's Blues Study Guide

Sonny's Blues by James Baldwin

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Sonny's Blues Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	6
Chapter 3.....	7
Chapter 4.....	8
Chapter 5.....	9
Chapter 6.....	10
Chapter 7.....	11
Chapter 8.....	12
Chapter 9.....	13
Chapter 10.....	14
Characters.....	16
Objects/Places.....	18
Themes.....	19
Style.....	21
Quotes.....	23
Topics for Discussion.....	25



Plot Summary

The narrator learns of his younger brother's arrest from a newspaper article. He dwells on the news all day long, while teaching algebra at a high school in Harlem. He wonders if the boys in his class are shooting up, too. The narrator remembers his younger brother, Sonny, back when he was in high school, with a bright and open face and wonderfully direct brown eyes.

After school the narrator converses with Sonny's friend. The friend wonders if he's partly responsible for Sonny's addiction, since he once told Sonny that doing heroin felt great. The narrator and Sonny's friend discuss the likelihood that Sonny will be sent away someplace to be cured. Sonny's friend imagines the problem will start over again after they let Sonny out.

The narrator doesn't contact Sonny in rehab until after the death of his own daughter, Gracie. Sonny's letter in reply makes the narrator feel like a bastard. Sonny apologizes for disappointing people who believed in him and expresses his need to get outside. He hopes his brother will meet him in New York when he is released. After that, the brothers do keep in touch, and they meet when Sonny is released.

The seven years' age difference between the narrator and Sonny has always kept them from being close. The two grew up in Harlem. The houses they grew up in are long gone, replaced by more housing projects. James Baldwin describes the hopeless situation that boys in Harlem face – leaving their smothering houses for the streets, seeking light and air, but finding themselves encircled by disaster. Some escape, but they leave a piece of themselves behind.

The narrator and his wife, Isabel, live in Harlem by choice. Isabel makes Sonny feel welcome and at ease in their home, while the narrator can't help studying Sonny for signs of addiction.

The narrator remembers that his own father once said no place was safe for kids. Daddy passes away when Sonny is fifteen, and at that time Mama asks the narrator to protect Sonny. She explains that their Daddy once had a brother, but he, along with his guitar, were run down by a group of drunk white men. Daddy witnessed his brother's death. Only Mama ever saw his tears, and she decided they should keep the story secret from their sons. The narrator promises to look out for Sonny, overwhelmed by Mama's words and her tears. However, at the time, the narrator is in the army and about to be married, and his promise is soon forgotten.

When Mama dies, the narrator comes home on furlough and remembers his promise. Trying to act like a father figure, he asks Sonny about his plans for the future. To the narrator's dismay, Sonny wants to be a jazz musician. While the narrator is thinking of old-school jazz, in the style of Louis Armstrong, Sonny scoffs at that "old-time, down home crap" (p. 12). Sonny wants to play improvisational jazz, known as bebop, popularized by Charlie Parker. The difference in the brothers' musical taste is one



example of their generation gap. The narrator hopes Sonny's desire to be a musician will be just a passing phase, and he makes arrangements for Sonny to live with his wife's parents and go to school. Sonny just wants to get out of Harlem.

Sonny practices jazz during every free minute while he's living with Isabel's parents. He plays the same passages over and over on his record player and on their piano, and the family tolerates the non-stop strange music as best they can, until one day they learn that Sonny hasn't been going to school. During the argument that follows, Sonny realizes that his precious music has been torture to everyone around him, and a few days later he runs away to Greece. Time passes, Sonny becomes a man, and the two brothers fight whenever they come into contact with one another.

The narrator moves forward in time again to the time when his daughter Gracie dies, months after he learns of Sonny's arrest. Gracie dies of polio at the age of two. She suffered a great deal, screaming, and unable to walk. Isabel continues to have nightmares about her little girl. The narrator's trouble makes Sonny's trouble seem real, and that is what inspires him to write to Sonny in rehab.

Sonny lives with the narrator and Isabel after his release. The narrator is tempted to search Sonny's room for evidence of drug use, but he is distracted by a revival meeting outside his window. The music seems to draw poison out of the people who are listening. Sonny is there too, and when he walks across the street the narrator notices his slow, loping walk, like a Harlem hipster, made unique with his own special half-beat.

Sonny invites his brother to hear him play at a nightclub that night in Greenwich Village. They discuss Sonny's addiction openly for the first time. Sonny explains that heroin can make a person feel in control, and that if a musician thinks he needs that feeling, then he needs it. Sonny thinks it's unfair that great music, like life, seems to require great suffering. He muses that people might as well do something bad, to create a reason for the suffering. Sonny admits he did bad things in the past, creating reasons for his suffering, mostly so he could get his next fix. Sonny confides that he wanted to leave Harlem after Mama died, mainly to get away from drugs. He acknowledges that he could start again at any time, and the narrator says he understands.

That night at the nightclub, the narrator realizes that Sonny is loved and respected in his world. A musician named Creole and two others form a quartet with Sonny. This is to be his first performance since his arrest over a year ago. At first, Sonny can't find his place in the musical conversation of the quartet, even though the other three try to help him. Finally, with Creole's patience and understanding, Sonny seems to find a brand-new piano beneath his fingers. His musical voice emerges.

Through Sonny's music, the narrator experiences the pain and passion that Sonny could not express in words. The narrator feels the pain of his own past while listening. He comes to understand not only the beauty of jazz, but also the inner beauty of his younger brother, Sonny.



Chapter 1

Summary

The narrator of *Sonny's Blues* begins his story in the subway, reading something in the paper that is important to him. The story shocks him. The narrator can't believe what he has read, and he dwells on it as he walks from the subway station to the high school where he teaches algebra. He feels a great block of ice in his belly, melting all day long as he thinks about his younger brother, Sonny. When Sonny was the same age as the narrator's students, he had a bright and open face, coppery hair, and direct brown eyes. The narrator wonders how Sonny looks now, after being picked up for peddling and using heroin the night before.

The narrator imagines that his students in algebra class might be popping off needles too as boys in Harlem grow up fast, filled with rage, and bumping their heads against "the low ceiling of their actual possibilities" (p. 1).

By the end of school that day the narrator's clothes are wet with sweat. He sits alone in his classroom, listening to the boys outside, shouting, cursing, and laughing. The teachers on duty in the courtyard want to get the boys out of their sight and off of their minds. The narrator decides to go home and talk to Isabel, his wife.

Analysis

The narrator of *Sonny's Blues*, whose name is never revealed, jumps right into the story with no introduction of himself. He simply begins: "I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work" (p. 1). The reader is left with the task of sorting out the details as the story moves along. What is the "it" the narrator read about? Who is the narrator? What job is the narrator headed to? Perhaps the location is New York City, given the subway reference, but even that is uncertain at first.

The reader learns that the narrator is an algebra teacher and that his brother, Sonny, had been busted for heroin the night before. The narrator compares his once open and innocent brother with the students he currently teaches. Their gritty Harlem neighborhood offers little hope for the future. Perhaps this is the reason Sonny turned to drugs.

Vocabulary

subway, algebra, peddling, heroin, head (slang), horse (slang), vindictively, mocking, insular, intent, denigrate, disenchanting, authority, courtyard



Chapter 2

Summary

As the narrator leaves the school he sees a young man that resembles Sonny, but the young man is actually Sonny's friend. The narrator never liked him, but sometimes gave him money when asked. The two walk toward the narrator's subway station. The narrator asks him why he wasn't arrested along with Sonny. Sonny's friend replies that he wasn't there, that he stays away from "them people" (p. 2). He goes on to say that he isn't smart, because if he were smart he would have reached for a pistol long ago. He mentions that he feels sort of responsible for Sonny's drug arrest, because Sonny had asked him, long ago, how it felt to do heroin, and the friend told him it felt great. However, he never gave heroin to Sonny.

The narrator wonders out loud what will happen to Sonny. Sonny's friend responds that they will likely send him away someplace to kick the habit, but Sonny never will. The narrator wonders why Sonny wants to die. Sonny's friend replies in surprise that he doesn't want to, that "Don't nobody want to die, ever" (p. 4). Sonny's friend casually mentions that he doesn't have any money, and the narrator's hatred melts into a feeling that he might cry. He gives the young man five dollars and gets on the subway.

Analysis

The narrator meets up with Sonny's friend after school, giving the narrator a chance to ask some burning questions out loud. He wonders what will happen to Sonny and why Sonny wants to die. Sonny's friend believes no one ever gets over being an addict, but also believes that nobody wants to die. In the background during this conversation is a bar, and a battered barmaid. When the "semi-whore" smiles, the narrator sees flashes of a little girl and a still-struggling woman. The barmaid sings and dances along with music from the juke box, illustrating the mix of music and menace in Harlem.

The narrator's long-standing dislike for Sonny's friend dissolves by the end of their conversation, when the narrator realizes this young man is doing his best to survive, just like Sonny and the other boys of Harlem.

Vocabulary

abruptly, cunning, repulsive, funky, loitering, hung (slang), bastard, juke box, battered, whore, quicksilver, menace, threatened



Chapter 3

Summary

The narrator confesses that he didn't write to Sonny for a long time after his arrest, not until just after the death of his little girl, Gracie. Sonny's letter in response makes him feel like a bastard. Sonny writes that he really needed to hear from his brother, but that he hadn't written because he understood how much he must have hurt his older brother. Sonny feels like a man trying to climb out of a deep and funky hole. He is glad that Mama and Daddy are dead, so they can't see what has happened, and he is sorry he hurt other fine people who believed in him. Sonny insists that his heroin use has nothing to do with being a musician. Regarding Gracie, Sonny wishes he could be like Mama and say "the Lord's will be done," but he doesn't see what good it does to blame God for trouble.

After reading Sonny's letter, the narrator keeps in touch and meets Sonny when he comes back to New York. Sonny looks older and thinner, but when he smiles the baby brother shines through. The seven years' difference in ages have kept them from being close. The narrator remembers, though, that he had heard Sonny's first words and that Sonny's first steps were toward his big brother. The narrator recalls that Sonny once wished to go to India, to sit on rocks, naked, and walk on coals to arrive at wisdom. The narrator had scoffed at the idea. Sonny asks if their driver could travel alongside the park on the way to the narrator's house, because he hasn't seen the city in so long.

Analysis

Even though the narrator and Sonny had never been close due to their age difference, Sonny's arrest drives them further apart. The narrator doesn't even write for a long time, until the death of his own daughter inspires him to reach out to his brother. Sonny responds quickly, eager to reestablish contact. Sonny is sorry for what he has done and wonders how he will manage once he is released from rehab. Once released, Sonny wants to drive alongside the park, to see the city. He seems nostalgic for a place he once wanted to leave, as well as nostalgic for a relationship with his older brother that hasn't really existed in the past.

Vocabulary

dug (slang), appreciate, flooding, depths, coaxed, chasm, anxious, hipped (slang), alongside, humoring



Chapter 4

Summary

The narrator and Sonny ride along between the green park and the streets of their childhood. The housing projects, the dingy houses, and the boys with no hope are the same as they were during the brothers' childhood. Although both the narrator and Sonny somehow escaped Harlem, they are somehow seeking the part of themselves they had left behind.

The narrator and his wife live in a housing project, but by choice, as it is close to where he teaches. The narrator worries that by bringing Sonny to his house, he is bringing him back into the danger Sonny had been trying to escape.

Analysis

Sonny asks to be driven alongside the green park; what he really wants to see are the gritty housing projects like the ones where he grew up. The buildings jut out of the streets "like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea" (p. 7). Boys who feel smothered by their houses, come into the streets for light and air, but still find themselves encircled by disaster. Even though some escape, a part of them remains behind. Of course, many never escape. This is the tragedy of the projects: hopeless generations breeding more hopeless generations.

Sonny escapes Harlem through travel and music, and yet he has not escaped his heroin addiction. The narrator escapes Harlem through education and hard work, and yet he chooses to live and teach in Harlem. A part of them can never escape.

Vocabulary

jutted, smothering, encircled, amputate, covertly, confrontation, member, uninhabitably, rundown, parody, jacks



Chapter 5

Summary

At dinner Isabel puts Sonny at his ease, even making him laugh. Sonny brings gifts for the narrator's two boys. The narrator, on the other hand, feels uncomfortable, checking for signs of Sonny's addiction. The narrator wants to believe that Sonny is safe. This thought leads him to remember his father saying that no place is safe for kids.

The narrator's father spent his life looking for something a little better, but he never found it. Sonny and Daddy often fought because they were so much alike and Daddy was frightened for him. Daddy died when Sonny was fifteen.

The narrator remembers being a child, forgotten for a moment by the adults, listening to their stories of their past and what they've seen. Just after his Daddy dies, Mama tries to warn the narrator about life's dangers. She tells him about Daddy's brother, never before mentioned, who had been run down, along with his guitar, by a drunken group of white men. Daddy seemed rough and strong, but Mama saw his tears. Mama asks the narrator to look after Sonny, and he agrees, much moved by the story, only to forget his promise as he makes wedding plans and goes away with the army. He is shipped home on a special furlough for his Mama's funeral.

Analysis

During Sonny's first dinner with the narrator and Isabel, the narrator has a flashback about his and Sonny's parents. They tried to keep their boys safe. Daddy had tried to look after his own younger brother in earlier years, only to see him killed by drunken white men. The narrator cried when Mama told him the story, realizing he must look out for Sonny as Mama asked, but he forgot his promise in the whirl of everyday life. Perhaps Sonny would not have become a heroin addict if the narrator had kept his promise. Regret is not enough to fix the problem after the fact.

Vocabulary

talkative, vivid, uneasy, embarrassed, freighted, dope, malice, jangling, kinfolk, Redeemer, furlough



Chapter 6

Summary

The narrator remembers a conversation with Sonny after their mother's funeral, finally trying to keep his promise to look after his younger brother. There he grills Sonny about his plans for the future. He is dismayed to learn that Sonny wants to be a jazz musician. The narrator shows how far removed he was from Sonny's sensibilities when he asks if Sonny wanted to play like Louis Armstrong. Sonny doesn't want to play "that old-time, down home crap" (p. 12) though; he wants to play like bebop musician Charlie Parker. The narrator has never heard of him and thus he doesn't understand Sonny's passion. Playing jazz is the only thing Sonny wants to do, other than to get out of Harlem.

At the time, Sonny reluctantly agrees to move in with Isabel's strict parents and finish school. He brightens when he learns that Isabel's parents have a piano.

Analysis

After years of not worrying much about younger brother, Sonny, the narrator turned parental after the death of their mother. Naturally, Sonny balked. He flaunted a cigarette and talked of joining the army. The brothers' generation gap was prominent when they discussed jazz. The narrator knew old-school jazz, while younger Sonny loved free-form bebop. The two brothers struggled to establish a new relationship – part brother and brother, part new friends, part parent and child.

Vocabulary

gravely, scarcely, classical, sobered, gestured, sullenly, bitterly, ignorant, desperately, dicty (slang), defiance



Chapter 7

Summary

Sonny moving in with Isabel's family turns out to be a mistake. Sonny plays jazz for hours on end. He buys a record player, plays one section of the record, then plays the same chord or progression over and over on the piano. The family tries to be patient, but they don't understand his music. Isabel finally says that it isn't like living with a person at all, but like living with sound. When a letter comes from the school board, stating that Sonny hasn't been going to school, Isabel's mother blows up. Sonny realizes he's been unintentionally torturing the family with his passion for music. He leaves, eventually sending his brother a postcard from Greece.

When the narrator and Sonny next meet, Sonny is a man. The narrator doesn't like Sonny's loose and dreamlike manner. The two fight, avoid each other for months, then fight again. The narrator says Sonny might as well be dead, the way he is living. Sonny responds that his brother shouldn't worry any more, to just consider him dead.

Analysis

People who didn't share Sonny's passion for jazz found him impossible to live with. His music and his lifestyle were free flowing, unstructured, and untraditional – the opposite of the narrator's straight and narrow life as a teacher, husband, and father. When the narrator left Sonny's apartment after their fight, he whistled an old jazz song, "Some of these Days," to keep from crying. But he got the lyrics wrong. He didn't grasp the basic language Sonny would use to communicate.

Vocabulary

record player, improvise, chord, progression, confessed, afflicted, atmosphere, decent, penetrated, endured



Chapter 8

Summary

The narrator reads about Sonny's arrest in the spring, and his daughter, Gracie, dies in the fall. Only after her death does the narrator write to Sonny. Gracie dies of polio at the age of two, after a great deal of suffering. The narrator's wife, Isabel, has nightmares about her little girl's screams.

One afternoon after Sonny is released from rehab, the narrator considers searching Sonny's room for evidence of something. What, specifically, he does not want to admit. Through a window he sees and hears a revival taking place, near the entrance to a barbecue joint. The music seems, for a moment, to soothe the residents of Harlem, as if removing a poison from them. Sonny is there, watching and listening. When the music stops, Sonny walks toward home with a typical Harlem hipster walk, but with his own special half-beat added.

Analysis

The narrator only tried to look after his younger brother, as he had promised, after the death of his mother. He only wrote to Sonny in rehab after the death of his daughter. The narrator seems to need a rush of family feeling, of grief, of guilt, before he feels inspired to reach out to Sonny. The narrator notices that music soothes the people of Harlem. He also notices that jazz even influences Sonny's walk with a special half-beat. He realizes that the world responds to music in a way he had never truly considered.

Vocabulary

polio, mortal, revival, conked, testifying, dominated, cuckoo's nest, belligerent, joint (slang), pressing, hipsters, apprehensive



Chapter 9

Summary

When Sonny returns from the revival, he and the narrator exchange casual pleasantries. Then Sonny asks his brother if he wants to come somewhere with him that night. The narrator senses that he should not say no. Sonny is playing at a club in the Village. He comments that when the woman was singing at the revival, her voice reminded him of what heroin feels like – “warm and cool at the same time” (p. 19). He explains that heroin makes people feel in control.

The narrator, now angry, asks if musicians need that control from heroin to play jazz. Sonny tries to respond with his eyes, with more than words, then says they need it if they think they do. Sonny thinks maybe musicians need heroin to make jazz at all, to keep from shaking to pieces. He thinks it's repulsive that a person has to suffer in order to sing the way the woman at the revival sang. The brothers agree that everyone suffers, and that there is no way not to suffer. Sonny comments that maybe it's better to do something bad, so that suffering has a reason. The narrator feels guilt for being silent toward Sonny for so long and makes a promise to himself to be a better brother.

Sonny explains that he'll do anything to play, even cut someone's throat. He could be talking about heroin or music. He can't forget where he's been or what he's been. He admits he did terrible things, and sometimes the people he did things to didn't seem real. He just needed to play his music or get a fix. He smelled his own stink sometimes, then wondered if maybe it was good to smell your own stink. Sonny admits to the narrator that when their Mama died, he wanted to leave Harlem to get away from drugs. He also warns that it can come again: the need for heroin.

Analysis

Sonny opens up to his brother, trying to explain the lure of heroin and its connection with jazz. He admits to evil he has done – his own stink – and, most importantly, he acknowledges that he could go back to doing heroin. But his new connection with his brother offers hope for a better future. The narrator promises himself that he will not fail Sonny again. Sonny is trying to kick his addiction. The narrator agrees to see Sonny perform in a nightclub; the two are searching for some peace, for some control. Everyone in Harlem seeks peace and control.

Vocabulary

sidelong, dispersed, lone, deliberately, contempt, pursuing, curb, impatiently, fix (slang), lodestone



Chapter 10

Summary

The narrator accompanies Sonny to a nightclub in the Village. The narrator sees Sonny in a new light, admired, talented, with the royal blood of a true musician. Sonny's fellow musician, Creole, is more of a father figure to Sonny than the narrator, protecting him and leading him to greatness onstage. Creole plays bass fiddle. Others play horn and drums. Sonny rounds out the quartet, playing piano. Everyone in the nightclub is poised to listen.

The narrator muses, eloquently, that most people don't really hear music, and if they do, they just hear "personal, private, vanishing evocations" (p. 23). However, the musician hears something else, and his triumph is everyone's triumph.

Creole, the artist, holds the other musicians back having a musical dialogue with Sonny. He is waiting for Sonny to metaphorically leave the shore and swim to the deep water. Sonny hasn't played in over a year. He stammers on the keys, tries again, panics, and finally finds direction, a seemingly brand-new piano. The quartet plays happily for a while, seeming to agree with Sonny that "brand-new pianos certainly were a gas" (p. 24). But then Creole, via his music, reminds them all that they are playing the blues, specifically Sonny's blues. The narrator realizes that Sonny's music could help everyone to be free, and that Sonny will never be free until everyone feels that freedom. The narrator envisions the sadness from his family's past, from his Mama's pain to the moonlit road where his father's brother died, to the death of his daughter, Gracie: all in Sonny's music.

The narrator buys Sonny a drink and, when Sonny places it on the piano after taking a sip, it glows and shakes above Sonny's head "like the very cup of trembling" (p. 25).

Analysis

The narrator's visit to the nightclub in the Village is the climax of the story. There he comes to understand Sonny's torment and Sonny's triumph, not through his words, but through his music. He realizes that everyone feels their own pain while listening to the blues, and that feeling the pain is cathartic. The drink he buys for Sonny glows and shakes on the piano when Sonny plays, "like the very cup of trembling" (p. 25), like the deep and complex emotions that cause a young man to try heroin, like the love that connects families in times of tragedy, and like the desperation that runs through the streets of Harlem.

Vocabulary

jam-packed, affectionately, confiding, perish, ceremonious, murmurs, indigo, corroborated, evocations, triumphant, dialogue, torment, stammered, sardonic, destruction, immense, lament, cease



Characters

Narrator

The narrator of *Sonny's Blues* is never named. He is the husband of Isabel and brother of Sonny. He was born and raised in Harlem; he lives there still as the story unfolds. The narrator's profession, teaching algebra, shows his desire to improve the minds of young people growing up in Harlem, but it also exemplifies his need for an orderly life, following the rules. He struggles with a combination of guilt and anger when his brother, Sonny, is arrested for possession of heroin. He eventually comes to understand his brother by listening to him play jazz.

Sonny

Sonny is seven years younger than his brother, the narrator. Their age difference keeps them from being close when they are growing up together in Harlem. Sonny struggles with heroin addiction and his desire to escape Harlem. He is a free spirit, unlike his older brother. Sonny finds release by playing a form of improvisational jazz known as bebop.

Isabel

Isabel is the narrator's wife. Her daughter, Gracie, dies of polio at the age of two. Isabel is kind and understanding, welcoming Sonny to her home when he is released from the rehab facility.

Sonny's friend

Sonny's friend who, like the narrator, is unnamed in the story, meets the narrator after school to talk about Sonny's arrest for heroin possession. Sonny's friend feels somewhat responsible for Sonny's addiction, because he once told Sonny that heroin felt great. Sonny's friend often asks the narrator for money.

Gracie

Gracie is the daughter of the narrator and Isabel. She dies of polio at the age of two. Gracie appears in "*Sonny's Blues*" only in flashbacks.



Mama

Mama is the mother of the narrator and Sonny. She once asks the narrator to look after Sonny, but the narrator forgets his promise until Mama dies, and then he forgets again until the death of his daughter, Gracie. Mama was the only one who saw Daddy's tears when he mourned the loss of his own brother. Mama appears in "Sonny's Blues" only in flashbacks.

Daddy

Daddy is the father of the narrator and Sonny. He has a gruff exterior and worries about the safety of his two boys. He witnessed the death of his own brother, a musician who was brutally run down by a group of drunken white men. Daddy dies when Sonny is fifteen. Daddy appears in "Sonny's Blues" only in flashbacks.

Isabel's mother

Isabel's mother agrees to take Sonny in after the death of his mother, and she tries to be patient with his constant practicing on her piano. She finally loses patience after she learns that Sonny has been skipping school.

Creole

Creole is a jazz musician, nurturing and fatherly toward Sonny. Creole plays bass fiddle. When Sonny returns to the stage after a year away in a rehab facility, Creole helps him find his musical voice.



Objects/Places

Subway

The story begins with the narrator riding in the subway. The subway carries the bustle of the city, along with the narrator's angst about his brother.

Heroin

Heroin is the weakness of Sonny and many others in Harlem. Sonny's addiction to heroin is a central issue in "Sonny's Blues." Sonny believes heroin helps some people feel more in control, including musicians. And yet, heroin addiction prevents Sonny from playing his beloved jazz for over a year.

Harlem

Harlem is the gritty, hopeless part of New York where "Sonny's Blues" takes place. Housing projects jut out of the streets like rocks in a boiling sea. Boys leave their smothering houses for light and air, only to find themselves encircled by disaster in Harlem. Sonny longs to escape Harlem, but his older brother chooses to live there and teach algebra in his neighborhood high school.

India

India is the place where a young Sonny once fantasized about escaping to. He wanted to seek wisdom there, far away from Harlem, by sitting naked on rocks and by walking barefoot through hot coals.

Piano

The piano is Sonny's instrument of choice for playing bebop jazz. When he plays with Creole and other musicians after more than a year away in rehab, Sonny's fingers fumble at first, but then seem to find a brand-new piano. Sonny communicates more with his piano than he does with words.

Greenwich Village

Greenwich Village is the location of the nightclub where the narrator finally sees his brother Sonny play jazz.



Themes

Sonny's Blues

The title of this short story has a double meaning. "Sonny's Blues" obviously refers to Sonny's main passion – playing jazz, playing the blues. But the title also refers to Sonny's discontent, his angst, and his reason for doing heroin, much of which stems from being brought up in the gritty hopelessness of Harlem.

Jazz

Music, particularly jazz, runs through "Sonny's Blues," initially in the background, as part of the general setting, and eventually as a central theme, when Sonny announces his plan to become a jazz musician.

Music even punctuates the generation gap between the narrator and Sonny. The narrator asks if Sonny wants to play like Louis Armstrong, and Sonny replies, "No, I'm not talking about none of that old-time, down home crap" (p. 12). Sonny wants to play like Charlie Parker, known as Bird, who plays a new, more improvisational form of jazz known as bebop.

The narrator worries that Sonny's heroin addiction is connected with him being a jazz musician. Ironically, though, heroin comes between Sonny and his music. Sonny doesn't perform for over a year after his arrest for using and possession. When he does return to the stage with his friend, Creole, and two other musicians, Sonny has to find his piano again, metaphorically speaking. The four play for a while, "just being happy with Sonny, they seemed to be agreeing with him that brand-new pianos certainly were a gas" (p. 24). The four actually communicate, have a conversation, using only a bass fiddle, a horn, drums, and Sonny's piano.

By the end of the story, jazz brings the two brothers together. Through music, Sonny reaches the narrator at his core, in a way mere words could not. The narrator feels Sonny's pain and relives the pain of his own past, all through the music of Sonny.

Ultimately, music is "the only light we've got in all this darkness" (p. 24).

Environment and Drug Use

James Baldwin strongly implies a connection between environment and drug use. The narrator speaks of the boys of Harlem, "growing up with a rush and their heads bumped against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities" (p. 1). He also imagines his students could be "popping off needles every time they went to the head" (p. 1).



Sonny admits that he always wanted to leave Harlem in order to get away from drugs. And yet, the narrator grew up in Harlem and still lives in Harlem, living as a responsible adult, not drawn into the world of illegal drugs. He is a high school algebra teacher, working to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. What is the difference between the narrator and so many others, including his own brother, Sonny? James Baldwin leaves that question for the reader to ponder.

Style

Point of View

“Sonny’s Blues” is written in the first-person point of view. The narrator is one of the two main characters in the story, along with his brother, Sonny, and yet his name is never revealed. The narrator is a black man who grew up in Harlem, and he chooses to live there as an adult. He offers a unique perspective on growing up in Harlem, based on his own experiences, the adventures of his brother, Sonny, and vivid descriptions of hopelessness and rage in the streets.

The narrator tells the story in a non-chronological order, alternating between his present time and flashbacks. The flashbacks amplify the characters, offering insight into their past and their motivations. For example, the narrator reveals in flashback that he had promised Mama he would look after Sonny, but then he failed to do so. This revelation explains why the narrator is struck so deeply by Sonny’s arrest.

At times the reader is left hanging, not sure what is happening, until the narrator chooses to fill in the blanks. Even in the initial sentences of the story, the reader wonders what the narrator read in the paper and why he is so upset about it. Only at the end of the third paragraph does the narrator finally reveal that his brother was arrested for peddling and using heroin. With this technique, author James Baldwin builds suspense and draws the reader into the story.

At the climax of “Sonny’s Blues,” the first-person perspective allows the reader to experience jazz music through the eyes and ears of the narrator. The reader shares the narrator’s appreciation of the non-verbal communication between Sonny and the other jazz musicians, as they help Sonny find his musical voice after a year in rehab. The reader shares the narrator’s acceptance of Sonny and his career choice. The reader shares the narrator’s new understanding of Sonny’s pain and passion, bridging the generation gap and past disagreements that had driven them apart.

Setting

Harlem in the middle of the twentieth century is the setting for “Sonny’s Blues.” Harlem is almost a character in the story, affecting the personalities and actions of the other characters. James Baldwin paints a bleak picture of Harlem, with housing projects jutting out of the streets “like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea” (p. 7). He speaks of angry boys, whose “heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities” (p. 1). The most poignant description of Harlem is that of the playground in the narrator’s housing project: “The playground is most popular with the children who don’t play at jacks, or skip rope, or roller skate, or swing, and they can be found in it after dark” (p. 7). Sonny wants to escape Harlem in order to escape drug use. And yet, the narrator actually chooses to remain in Harlem as an adult, teaching algebra to the



next generation of boys with limited possibilities. He represents hope for the future of Harlem. Language and Meaning

Baldwin's use of slang adds dimension to the story, making the characters come to life. "Horse" (p. 1) is heroin, which can be determined in context. The "head" (p. 1) is the bathroom, where high school boys might go to shoot up. Sonny was arrested, or "hung" (p. 3), for heroin possession. "Joints" (p. 17) are places to eat and, of course, to listen to jazz. "Hipsters" (p. 18) have a certain walk. These slang words anchor the story in both time and location.

Language and Meaning

The narrator moves forward and back in time to tell his story. He paints a brief sketch of events, then reminisces about the past to give the events context and to establish reasons for the actions of the characters.

The plot evolves the path to understanding between the narrator and his younger brother, Sonny. The two were distant growing up, due to their seven-year age difference. The narrator promised his Mama that he would look after Sonny, but that promise was forgotten due to the narrator's wedding and army service. When Sonny is arrested for drug use, the narrator feels guilty, but he doesn't act until the death of his own daughter inspires him to renew contact. The narrator disapproves of Sonny's career choice, playing jazz, and feels it is connected with drug use. At the end of the story, however, the narrator comes to understand Sonny by really listening to his music. He feels Sonny's pain and passion as he gains a new appreciation for jazz as an art form.

Structure

The narrator moves forward and back in time to tell his story. He paints a brief sketch of events, then reminisces about the past to give the events context and to establish reasons for the actions of the characters.

The plot evolves the path to understanding between the narrator and his younger brother, Sonny. The two were distant growing up, due to their seven-year age difference. The narrator promised his Mama that he would look after Sonny, but that promise was forgotten due to the narrator's wedding and army service. When Sonny is arrested for drug use, the narrator feels guilty, but he doesn't act until the death of his own daughter inspires him to renew contact. The narrator disapproves of Sonny's career choice, playing jazz, and feels it is connected with drug use. At the end of the story, however, the narrator comes to understand Sonny by really listening to his music. He feels Sonny's pain and passion as he gains a new appreciation for jazz as an art form.

Quotes

A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. It was a special kind of ice. It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins, but it never got less. Sometimes it hardened and seemed to expand until I felt my guts were going to come spilling out or that I was going to choke or scream. This would always be a moment when I was remembering some specific thing Sonny had once said or done.

These boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together than they were at any other time, and more alone.

The seven years' difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm: I wondered if these years would ever operate between us as a bridge.

We had a lot to say to each other, far too much to know how to begin.

Most of the houses in which we had grown up had vanished, as had the stores from which we had stolen, the basements in which we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks. But houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothering in these houses, came down into the streets for light and air and found themselves encircled by disaster.

The playground is most popular with the children who don't play at jacks, or skip rope, or roller skate, or swing, and they can be found in it after dark.

For a minute they've forgotten the children. Maybe a kid is lying on the rug, half asleep. Maybe somebody's got a kid in his lap and is absent-mindedly stroking the kid's head. Maybe there's a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frighten the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop – will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won't be sitting around the living room, talking about where they've come from and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kinfolk.

I somehow had the feeling that being a drummer might be all right for other people but not for my brother Sonny.

With another part of my mind I was thinking that this would probably turn out to be one of those things kids go through and that I shouldn't make it seem important by pushing it too hard.



What was happening was that they penetrated his cloud, they had reached him. Even if their fingers had been times more gentle than human fingers ever are, he could hardly help feeling that they had stripped him naked and were spitting on that nakedness. For he also had to see that his presence, that music, which was life or death to him, had been torture for them and that they had endured it, not at all for his sake but only for mine.

As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last.

It's terrible sometimes, inside,' he said, 'that's what's the trouble. You walk these streets, black and funky and cold, and there's not really a living ass to talk to, and there's nothing shaking, and there's no way of getting it out – that storm inside. You can't talk it and you can't make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize nobody's listening. So you've got to listen. You got to find a way to listen.

I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? my stink, and I thought I'd die if I couldn't get away from it and yet, all the same, I knew that everything I was doing was just locking me in with it....Something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink, but I didn't think that that was what I'd been trying to do – and – who can stand it?

All that hatred down there,' he said, 'all that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart.

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours.

I had never thought before of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own.

He seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano. It seemed that he couldn't get over it. Then, for a while, just being happy with Sonny, they seemed to be agreeing with him that brand-new pianos certainly were a gas.

I saw the girl put a Scotch and milk on top of the piano for Sonny. He didn't seem to notice it, but just before they started playing again, he sipped from it and looked toward me, and nodded. Then he put it back on top of the piano. For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Why didn't the narrator ever use illegal drugs, like so many around him in the streets of Harlem? Why did Sonny start using heroin? Does the narrator bear any responsibility for Sonny's drug addiction? Does Sonny's friend, introduced early in the story, bear any responsibility for Sonny's drug use? Is jazz music the cause of Sonny's drug addiction? How likely is Sonny to do heroin again after the story ends?

Topic 2

How are the personalities of the narrator and Sonny affected by their parents and by family history? How does the relationship between the narrator and Sonny compare with the relationship between Daddy and his brother? Why does Mama ask the narrator to look after Sonny? Is Mama justified in placing such a burden on the narrator? Why does the narrator forget his promise to look after Sonny for so long? What inspires the narrator to improve his relationship with his younger brother?

Topic 3

How does James Baldwin weave death into the story? What is the impact of the death of Mama, of Daddy, of Daddy's brother, and of Gracie, on the narrator and Sonny? Do drug users want to die, in the author's view?

Topic 4

What is the importance of setting in this story? What are the main features of Harlem in the middle of the twentieth century, as seen by the narrator? What affect does Harlem life have on youth? Why does Sonny want to escape Harlem? Why does the narrator deliberately choose to stay in Harlem? What options do young boys in Harlem have to escape?

Topic 5

How does James Baldwin inject music throughout the story, both as part of the setting and as an important part of the plot? When the reader learns that the narrator equates jazz with Louis Armstrong, while Sonny prefers Charlie Parker, what is revealed about the differences between the two brothers? How does Sonny's struggle to become a jazz musician relate to his struggle to overcome drug addiction? Near the end of the story what revelations does the narrator have, regarding music appreciation? How does music ultimately bring the narrator and Sonny closer?