

Omorovbiye Idehen-Solomon

Professor Elaine Lux

ENG 102

18 April 2023

James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': Examining the Complexities of Harlem's Community and its impact on the characters.

The short story "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin, which was published in the year 1957, is a compelling examination of how community and environment can impact human behaviors. The story revolves around the lives of two brothers, Sonny, a troubled jazz musician, and the unnamed narrator, a school teacher, as they struggle and negotiate their complicated relationship while being tormented by their shared past. The story is set in Harlem, within the African American community in the mid-20th century. Baldwin uses the story's settings to expose the impact of the environment and community on the characters' lives. This paper seeks to examine the social and environmental influences on the characters in "Sonny's Blues" by highlighting the significance of acknowledging these influences when evaluating human behaviours.

A person's environment and community can significantly impact their opportunities, choices, and growth. For instance, people who grow up in underprivileged areas with little access to good education, healthcare, and career prospects frequently confront considerable obstacles to success and progression in life. In this case, Residents of the Harlem neighborhood have to conform to various standards and expectations to survive due to the community's harsh nature.

As a former resident of Harlem, Baldwin highlights the negative impact of drug abuse and violence on the Harlem neighborhood. “In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin describes the sense of dread he felt there as a boy of fourteen:

... the wages of sin were visible everywhere, in every wine-stained and urine-splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin: a cousin, mother of six, suddenly gone mad, the children parceled out here and there; an indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow, agonizing death in a terrible small room; someone's bright son blown into eternity by his own hand; another turned robber and carried off to jail. It was a summer of dreadful speculations and discoveries, of which these were not the worst. Crime became real, for example-for the first

time-not as a possibility but as the possibility." (Baldwin 34-35; qtd. in Sherard 692).

The unpleasant realities that many residents in this environment must confront are highlighted through Sonny's battle with heroin addiction and the narrator's interaction with a former student who had also fallen prey to drug use. The narrator states, " I saw this boy standing in the shadow of a doorway, looking just like Sonny. I almost called his name. Then I saw that it was not Sonny, but somebody we used to know, a boy from around our block..... And now, even though he was a grown-up man, he still hung around that block, still spent hours on the street corners, was always high and raggy." (Baldwin 224). Sonny's descent into drug addiction and crime is exacerbated by the environment's lack of opportunities highlighting the influence of environmental influences on the formation of human character. Sonny struggles to find his place in the world, feeling overwhelmed by the lack of opportunities in his community, with his passion for jazz music serving as his only means of escape. To this effect, Reilly writes, "What Sonny was doing indicates that his response to the conditions imposed upon him by racial status was to try to assimilate himself as well as he could get into the mainstream American culture. For the one, heroin addiction sealed his membership in the exclusive group....." (Reilly 58). Conversely, the narrator is a school teacher who has been able to escape the cycle of poverty and crime by acquiring an education, but he is unable to escape the setting that has molded his personality; thus, he is stuck in Harlem.

"Some escaped the trap, most didn't. Those who got out always left something of themselves behind, as some animals amputate a leg and leave it in the trap. 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. Yet, as the cab moved uptown through streets which seemed, with a rush, to darken with dark people, and as I covertly studied Sonny's face, it came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind. It's always at the hour of trouble and confrontation that the missing member aches." (Baldwin 229).

The socioeconomic circumstances in Harlem, which restrict their possibilities for personal growth and fulfillment, significantly influence the story's characters. Schlosser echoes this sentiment in his article, noting that "Baldwin infects others with perplexity, forcing his readers to grapple with the difficulties of 'trying to be a decent human being and thinking person in the face of the pervasive mendacity and hypocrisy of the American empire'" (80Furthermoreer 487).

Furthermore, Baldwin also uses the story to explore the emotional traumas and challenges the characters are confronted with. For instance, the narrator recalls how their father battled alcoholism and suffered from inner anguish after failing to shield his brother from a hit-and-run accident that was committed by a couple of drunk white men who were never held accountable. "This car was full of white men. They were all drunk, and when they seen your father's brother they let out a great whoop and holler and they aimed the car straight at him.....Your Daddy was like a crazy man that night and for many a night thereafter."(Baldwin 233). His experience of this racial injustice and violence permanently marred their father with guilt and bitterness, which he carried with him throughout his life. "Oh, yes. Your Daddy never did really get right again. Till the day he died he weren't sure but that every white man he saw was the man that killed his brother." (Baldwin 233).

The trauma affects both his relationships with his sons and his outlook on the world."Safe!" my father grunted whenever Mama suggested trying to move to a neighborhood which might be

safer for children. "Safe, hell! Ain't no place safe for kids, nor nobody."(Baldwin 230).

Likewise, the terrible passing of the narrator's daughter, Grace, was also a turning point in the life of the narrator, and it likely influenced how he perceives Sonny's difficulties. After experiencing the loss of his child, the narrator starts to understand the extent of Sonny's suffering and addiction, which helps the brothers develop empathy for one another. The persistent effect of past and present experiences on the narrator is shown in his grief. "Eventually, a great personal pain--the loss of a young daughter--breaks through the narrator's defenses and makes him seek out his brother....." (Reilly 57). The narrator gradually realizes how crucial empathy and comprehension are to his relationship with his brother. He learns the value of validating and acknowledging his brother's suffering. Sonny's spiral into heroin addiction and crime are influenced by his upbringing in Harlem and the emotional weight he received from his family. The characters' emotional tragedies and difficulties highlight the intricate interaction of outside forces and interior emotions that shape their behavior and choices.

Stereotypes and biases can persist if the impact of the environment and community on human behavior is not acknowledged. This can reduce the capacity for empathy and understanding and propagate negative prejudices. One can develop empathy and understanding, which can result in more thoughtful and compassionate decisions and behaviors, by examining a broader context and considering the systematic difficulties marginalized populations experience. Understanding the intricate interplay of societal and environmental factors and personal experiences is essential to comprehending how environment and community affect the characters' behaviour in "Sonny's Blues".

Works Cited

James Baldwin. "Sonny's Blues." *Literature: A Portable Anthology*, Edited by Janet E. Gardner Et Al., 4th Ed., Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2017, P.223-249.

Reilly, John M. "'Sonny's Blues': James Baldwin's Image of Black Community." *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1970, pp. 56–60. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041352>. Accessed 14 Apr. 2023.

Schlosser, Joel Alden. "Socrates in a Different Key: James Baldwin and Race in America." *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2013, pp. 487–99. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23563160>. Accessed 14 Apr. 2023.

Sherard, Tracey. "Sonny's Bebop: Baldwin's 'Blues Text' as Intracultural Critique." *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1998, pp. 691–705. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2901246>. Accessed 14 Apr. 2023.