"Now These Are Sonny’s Blues": Suffering and Sympathy in the Short Story

Morality, as described by Jonathan Culler, establishes a code of conduct and judgment that is often shaped by “class interests, historical circumstances, cultural tradition, even self-interest” (Culler 122) while ethics contain more openness, spaces for alternatives to the established moral values. A strong sense of morality may lead people to make rigid, biased judgment, while a concern for ethics accepts the difference of other moral positions and even gives the possibility for a change in these positions. In making the narrator of Sonny’s Blues go through this shift, from condemning his brother’s lifestyle to understanding Sonny’s suffering, James Baldwin also succeeded in suggesting an alternative, amoral view of Sonny’s use of heroin, and most of all, invoking the readers’ sympathy for both of the main characters.

The narrator started out the story “with a great block of ice in his belly” upon learning about Sonny’s arrest. Sonny “became real” for him again at that moment, the brother who had fallen out of his orbit, who had denied all of the narrator’s plans for him and instead chosen to pursue a life as a jazz musician and got involved with heroin. The talk between the narrator and Sonny’s old friend, whom he was not entirely fond of either, revealed his inability to understand why Sonny had made those wild, risky life choices while he had been such a bright, respectful young boy. Only after his youngest daughter passed away did he try to reconnect with Sonny, whose response was so full of care for his brother and hidden personal pain that it made him “feel like a bastard.” Sonny had changed a lot to his brother when they finally met again in New York, but somehow he still retained some parts of the baby brother that the narrator once cherished so much. This was when the narrator
started wondering beyond Sonny’s life as a jazz pianist and involvement with heroin to his internal
life, the things that motivated him to make the choices that he did.

The narrator first tried to come to an understanding by looking back at Sonny’s childhood
and the life that they had shared, the brotherhood broken by differences and lack of understanding.
Growing up Sonny had had a difficult relationship with his father, which according to the narrator
had not been because their father had hated him, but rather the opposite. Their father had loved
Sonny so much that he had not known any other way to express his care but to be difficult with him.
This tough relationship, however, had contributed to making Sonny retreat even further into his
innate quiet privacy. Sonny’s elder brother, being only 22 when their father had passed away and
occupied with various problems of his own, did not exactly succeed in being the father figure that
Sonny would have needed. Despite his promise to their mother to always be there for Sonny no
matter how he would turn out, he did not listen to Sonny’s desire to become a jazz musician, but
forced him to continue on the path he had planned for him. Living with his sister-in-law Isabel’s
family while his brother continued his time in the army, Sonny played music religiously, spent time
with other musicians, and paid no mind to his formal education. The people around him, unable to
understand his passion for music, had left him alone at first, but as they had also been struggling to
give him a home and an education, they had deemed him ungrateful when the truth that he was not
going to school got out. Sonny then chose to enlist in the navy and move far away rather than stay
with these people who had not understood him at all and only tolerated him for his brother’s sake.
Sonny’s vehement defiance of his brother’s wishes had driven a big gap between the two of them,
one that neither had tried to mend until the narrator’s little daughter Grace died and Sonny came back
to Harlem. Only then did each brother start to see that the other’s own pains and suffering, and try to
bridge this gap.

However, no matter how much the narrator delved into the external factors of Sonny’s life, a
large part of the understanding, the explanation that he was looking for lay in Sonny’s internal life,
his perception of hardships and suffering and his method of coping with them. Sonny, like their father, had "that same privacy"—he had never been particularly talkative, and most of his emotions were expressed through his music. Even if his family loved him and cared about him, they had never understood his behavior—his brother, the one who cared about him the most after their parents had died, thought of his music as an excuse for his lousy lifestyle. This lack of acceptance from the people around him, and the never-ending suffering he perceived in Harlem, prompted Sonny to distance himself from them, from the place he was born in. After years and years of incomprehension, the narrator only began to understand Sonny's inner torment when faced with a tragedy of his own, his young daughter's death. Looking at the four musicians performing across the street from their window, the narrator felt for the first time the effect of the music, not only to the listeners but also to the players. Then when Sonny started explaining why he was involved with jazz and heroin, how they made him feel alive, "kept him from shaking to pieces", the narrator was torn between his moral habit of condemning heroin use for whatever reason and his ethics telling him to truly listen to his brother.

Here both the narrator and the reader for the first time have a glimpse of Sonny's situation from his point of view, with heroin at the center of his coping and suffering. Heroin, to Sonny, had a two-sided effect: "warm and cool", "distant ... and sure". Heroin made something real for artists like Sonny, alleviated their suffering, if only for a little bit. They could not just "take it", like the narrator said, because everyone had to suffer but no one's way of coping with suffering had to be the same—they could "take it", or they could follow the call of artistic expression; even heroin was a justifiable tool to lessen suffering in this regard. However, heroin was also what Sonny was trying to run away from when he had tried to leave Harlem, a cause and a symbol of the hardships all around him that never seemed to change from generation to generation. Heroin use had given Sonny moments of spiritual escape but had also made him harm himself and other people, and he did not know how to feel about it, that the heroin habit might come back to him again. He even acknowledged it with a
kind of resignation. Baldwin took an unconventional approach to heroin use in this story; he neither hailed nor condemned it, turning it into an almost amoral tool that people like Sonny utilized to make their existence feel bearable. Baldwin pointed out that not everyone who was using heroin wanted to throw away their lives; on the contrary, some of them were using it to cling onto life itself.

Throughout the story and the narrator's mental and emotional journey to understand his baby brother, the reader not only got to know and sympathize with Sonny but also with the narrator himself as a person with his own various torments and his own ways of coping with them. Contrary to Sonny, who always expressed his suffering hardships through music, the narrator suppressed his emotions and internalized his pains: he had "whistled to keep from crying" when Sonny refused to see him, and felt a "mortal wound" when his wife was crying on him when their daughter died, but he never acted on these sorrows. Contrary to Sonny, who always wanted to get away from Harlem, the narrator never strayed away: he served in the army, got married, became an algebra teacher, and took care of his family. It seems like he was just "taking it", accepting the hardships as a part of life, never considering his own passions or dreams. Even if the narrator's lifestyle seemed suffocating, especially compared to Sonny's more spontaneous ways, it was his own way of coping with the hardships that came from growing up and building a family in Harlem.

The brother's understanding for Sonny and the reader's sympathy for the both of them came to a climax when the narrator came to see Sonny play with his band for the first time. For the first time, the narrator was in a space where Sonny was the active force, where "his veins bore royal blood", rather than on the passive, suffering side. This was a place where people clearly showed their appreciation for Sonny's abilities as a musician, and Sonny's musicianship was no longer something abstract to the narrator's mind. The reader, despite not being able to listen to the music, could feel the magic of it stirring in the air and in the narrator, feel the transformation occurring in him as the songs went on. The wordplay on "Sonny's blues", 'blues' meaning both the genre of music and feelings of sadness, is apt to convey how the brother was not only listening to and understanding Sonny's music,
but also sympathizing with his sadness and pain. There was a fire on Sonny’s face and within his deft fingers at that moment, a fire that would keep on burning to tell the story “of how we suffer, of how we are delighted, and how we may triumph,” for it always must be heard. The narrator’s emotions were also overflowing, and for once he did not try to hold them back: in a moment’s glimpse he saw and felt the hardships of his mother, the pain of his father, his wife’s and his own grief over their little daughter’s passing. And he knew that there was still trouble, still misfortune waiting for them out there, but within that music he did not see a dead end but rather freedom and hope. Sonny turned into an almost sacred being, the glow above his head like a halo of an angel, the “very cup of trembling” the Holy Grail. Sonny’s music had entranced the narrator, helped him not only better understand his brother but also himself.

Culler argued that literature often exposes both the “rigidity of ‘morality’” and the “indeterminacy of ethics” (Culler 122). *Sonny’s Blues* certainly demonstrated this dichotomy, from the narrator’s strict embrace of morality against heroin use and ‘wild’ lifestyles to his ethical acceptance of Sonny’s differences. Contrary to the conventional view of heroin as a tool by which to impose moral judgment, Baldwin has made it amoral – irrelevant to any moral questions that could be asked. No matter what the reader’s moral view is – to oppose heroin use or support artistic expression – he or she can sympathize with the “blues” of not just Sonny but also the narrator, the feeling of being trapped forever at the bottom and the desire to escape, not just physically but also spiritually.