

## When The Music Starts, The Drugs Stop

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In the short story “Sonny’s Blues,” James Baldwin drives his theme of pain and suffering as we follow Sonny’s journey to escape and overcome his drug addiction. The scene takes place in the 1950s, a time period where Jazz musicians and drug addicts had impacted the Harlem community. Baldwin develops his theme on the influence that the drugs had on Sonny and how he overcame this addiction to drive away from all the pain he had growing up. The constant agony taught him to become a rebel in the sense that he started doing heroin at a young age. However, with his discovery for his passion in music, a healing relationship between him and his brother, and the forgiveness Sonny is able to give himself, he is able to fulfil his dreams of becoming a musician and finally put an end to all the pain and suffering.

The Harlem society may have been addicted to the horrible influences of drugs, but something they were also addicted to was jazz. Famous jazz musicians in the fifties struggled to find their own path away from all the pain and suffering. This musical pathway, changed the music game as well as expanded the world of jazz outside of Harlem. Jazz encouraged African American musicians to tell their own story and connect with others who relate to the same pain they had growing up. They felt inferior due to the racist acts performed by white males. By becoming addicted to the music in a positive way, this musical genre helped Sonny escape his own problem, his addiction to drugs. At first, Baldwin’s hesitation with the situation causes a commotion between the two brothers, as he believes that the path Sonny has chosen won’t benefit him in the future. But, Baldwin depicts Sonny’s determination that he can do anything and be anything if he is able to put

his mind to it. Baldwin uses music to symbolise Sonny's power to overcome his drug addiction. One of his famous influences of Jazz, Charlie Parker, inspired Sonny to become a better musician. Sonny's imprisonment shown in the first paragraph of the story, has gotten him into rough patches before. The temptation for drug use went away after Baldwin lets Sonny move in with him. "But I thought I'd never hear the end of that piano. At first, Isabel would write me, saying how nice it was that Sonny was so serious about his music and how, as soon as he came in from school, or wherever he had been when he was supposed to be at school, he went straight to that piano and stayed there until supper time." The more he practiced and became addicted to music, the weaker his addiction for drugs got.

Although Sonny discovered his passion for music on his own, he gained more willpower through the trust and guidance from his relationship with his brother. Even though the brothers are seven years apart, Baldwin makes it clear that he will do whatever it takes to protect and care for his brother. Having this healing relationship is important to Baldwin to since he gave his mother his word before she died. "I ain't telling you all this," she said, "to make you scared or bitter or to make you hate nobody. I'm telling you this because you got a brother. And the world ain't changed." "... You got to hold onto 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 gets with him. You going to be evil with him many a time. But don't you forget what I told you, you hear?" "Then, "You may not be able to stop nothing from happening, but you got to let him know you's there." Sonny starts to move on and get past all of the hardships he went through growing up. Since Baldwin is the last family member standing, he uses the motif of Sonny's music to push Sonny in a good direction away from the pain of the drugs. It's interesting how this story Baldwin tells is from his perspective, as the brother of Sonny. As the narrator, he tries to empathise towards his brother in all the rough times he has gone through. At the

end, we see how proud of a brother he has become, and with all the support he wouldn't be able to have the right guidance to escape his drug addiction.

Sonny may have had a mind of his own, but it did take him awhile to process how he was going to overcome his drug addiction himself. Towards the end of the story we recognise a dialogue between Sonny and Baldwin, resembling all of Sonny's thoughts after his imprisonment. Baldwin developed his theme of pain and suffering by not only clearing the relationship with his brother but also trying to forgive himself as well. "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 realise nobody's listening. So you've got to listen. You got to find a way to listen." The key part in the repetition that Baldwin develops while Sonny explains forgiving himself is that Sonny needs to listen to himself. "And other times — well, I needed a fix, I needed to find a place to lean, I needed to clear a space to listen — and I couldn't find it, and I — went crazy, I did terrible things to me, I was terrible for me." He reassures at the end of the story how much Sonny wanted to escape Harlem in order to overcome his drug addiction. The dialogue between Sonny and Baldwin talk about how heroin had a strong negative impact on Sonny and that the drugs did so much damage. He repeats this escape a few times in the story by talking about how much he doesn't want to die. "I won't," he said, flatly, "die trying not to suffer. At least, not any faster than anybody else."

As the story comes to an end, Sonny discovers a new passion to cure his addiction of drugs and changing the game in the world of jazz. Many people come to watch Sonny perform and as he finally listens to himself, he is able to give a wonderful performance to those at the bar. Baldwin comes to a realisation from his brother's experience, which is able to remind him of all the times he

was able to bring Sonny closure from the addiction. The bad memories have started to fade away from their childhood: the death of the parents, Baldwin's uncle killed by white males, as well as the death of Baldwin's own child. At that moment, Baldwin realises how thankful and appreciative he is to see Sonny up on stage having escaped the pain and suffering.

Work Cited:

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