

The relationship
between art and
suffering in james
baldwin's sonny's
blues essay...



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James Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues" tells of the struggle of Sonny to overcome the oppression of poverty and hardship to obtain his own American dream in jazz music as well as the failure of life to live up to this dream. Told from the point-of-view of Sonny's older brother, the story begins with the knowledge of Sonny's heroin related arrest and bottoming-out.

Coming back to Harlem to live with his brother after months of rehabilitation, Sonny is confronted by the same emotional and artistic restraints and temptations that led to his previous down-fall. Attempting to explain his personal fall into addiction, Sonny relates the connections between his drug use, the hopelessness that permeates black life in Harlem, and the desire to tap into himself to find the musical notes that hum below the surface of his being. Having fallen prey to the hopelessness of life for an African American man living on the margins of society in the mid-20th century and to his own need to tap into the artistic reservoir of feeling that is at the heart of his particular artistic expression, Sonny stumbles only to regain himself and his life in the music itself. The return of Sonny to the housing projects in Harlem is tentatively hopeful. Too much and too little history exists between the brothers.

Having both grown up in the impoverished neighborhoods of Harlem, both brothers left for the military and while one returned to become a teacher, the other, Sonny, took his love for jazz music and worked to translate it into reality. However, the pull of drugs in Harlem was too strong and the volatility of the oppression of the social restrictions and poverty to overbearing. Sonny tells his brother, "All that hatred down there [...] all that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart" (Baldwin). Sonny's

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love for the piano and jazz music, meant as a means of releasing him from Harlem and the temptation of the drugs and criminality, is tainted by an internal struggle to release that same “hatred and misery and love” from himself. Talking about his own fight against the temptations of heroin, Sonny touches on the need to use something external to tap into the internal creative reservoir, “there’s no way of getting 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” (Baldwin). Sonny’s way of listening, of tapping into the boldness within himself and overcoming the doubts that have become part of his life has been through heroin.

By being able to look at the world through the distorted lens of his drug use, Sonny was able to rearrange himself and better approach his art, “it was actually when I was most out of the world, I felt that I was in it, that I was with it, really, and I could play or I didn’t really have to play, it just came out of me, it was there” (Baldwin). As he lost himself in the drugs and the suffering it entailed, Sonny’s past was eclipsed and he was freer to approach the music. While the pain and circumstance of his young life contributed to the use of heroin, Sonny’s relationship with music was created from this very same suffering. While drugs created their own suffering and defined Sonny’s life for many years, it was not that pain and internal struggle that comes through in the Village club Sonny and his brother go to at the end of the story. Having grown unused to performing because of his stay in rehab and even more unused to performing sober, there is a tentativeness to Sonny’s initial performance.

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Having buried living and pain beneath the continual flow of heroin through his veins, Sonny's art as much as Sonny himself is looking for a new way to deal "with the road rising from the void" (Baldwin). Music itself becomes a way to make sense of the world, "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" (Baldwin). After having numbed the pain, Sonny's performance becomes about utilizing that pain to reach a new place in his music. Though the piano had always provided solace and some focus for Sonny, now sober he must make it the scalpel to reveal and the salve to soothe the realities of life.

So deep is this connection between life and the suffering it sometimes entails and art itself, that not only must Sonny find the music in the piano but he must "fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life" (Baldwin). While at first Sonny stumbles in his playing, the feeling flattened by his inability to connect wholeheartedly with his music, the music eventually becomes Sonny, "Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life [...] I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did" (Baldwin). The expression of his life through music, the deep connection between Sonny and the piano, becomes a form of eternal life. With his art, Sonny is giving back to life and creating life instantaneously. While the lifestyle of a jazz musician created vulnerability in Sonny's life to the temptations of heroin, it was the overall oppression of life itself that created the circumstance from which he sought to escape. First trying to escape from the drugs through the military and then his music,

Sonny finds himself unable to battle the addiction and realize the eternity of his music.

It is only when Sonny is clean, struggling to once more find his real self in the music, that his life begins to emerge from darkness. The connection between his life, the suffering of poverty and disenfranchisement of Harlem in the mid-20th century, and the music is both a strong but brittle bond. As he sought to find his music through heroin, he also numbed the life and the reality of suffering that at first made it a necessity and then made it into art. Sonny does not overcome his suffering through art; instead Sonny is learning to bring that same suffering of life within himself and his music.