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“Sonny’s Blues” research paper

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" is a heart-wrenching story of two brothers that grew up in Harlem, New York. Looking at the story, we can see that it is evident that both brothers took two completely different paths in life. One brother became an algebra teacher, and the other chose a life of drugs and crime. We see that the narrator during the story has an internal conflict within himself about his brother and the life he so chose. Look at the narrator, we can see that he has hurt and broken over his brother, and we can tell that he is struggling with his past. As the story is read, one can only think he is partly to blame. As we see in the story, Sonny tries to adjust to life outside of prison, and there is a rekindling between the two brothers as they reminisce in the past about their childhood. As the story ends, we see that Sonny indeed finds freedom in his life through the music that from a very young he wanted to do, and in the same token, we see the narrator get some closure as well as he watches his brother play Blues on the piano while the crowd cheers on Sonny. Many symbolisms in the story speak to the human heart, especially for those in an urban community. We see poverty, family drama, hurts, and a fantastic redemption story.

In this paper, I will be exploring the relationship between the two brothers, how the experiences Sonny went through affected his life, the generational trauma that they may have gone through, and the redemption story that is so prevalent in both the narrator and Sonny lives, and how it relates to the African American culture. Lastly, I believe it is vital to give you a brief

overview of why I chose to do the story "Sonny's Blues," how this story speaks to my life, and how many of the points I will be touching on were so prevalent in my life.

I have lived in an urban community. I grew up in the Bronx, NY, with my mother, father, brother, and sister. The area I lived in and still live in is callous, and it is full of pain, disappointments, and the grim reality that maybe one day, someone's kids will not come home. I grew up in a typical house home where my father worked, and my mother stood home and took care of us. As I grew up more in the streets, I got into life selling drugs and got involved with the wrong people, which led me down a terrible path. I was heading down a very dark path quickly, and my family could do nothing but worry and pray for me because of the road I was taking. After becoming mature and stopping my foolish ways, I began to get my life together and put myself and the drug program, I got my first job and, shortly after that, got married and had kids. Everything seemed to have been going well for me, but when I looked behind me, my little brother always looked up to me, trying to take the same paths I had taken. I did not want to see it or believe it because this was my little brother, and he was headed down the same path I took, but I chose to ignore it.

He wanted to spend time with me and tell me his dreams and aspirations and ignored it as well. As I read the story of "Sonny's Blues," I cannot help but see the frightening similarities between the narrator and me in how we feel some guilt about how our brothers ended up. It has a lot to do with our upbringing as children. However, his upbringing in Sonny is a significant component of the lifestyle he chose, so let us look at his upbringing of Sonny to see if there were any telltale signs of why he chose the path that he did.

When we look at the opening of the story, the narrator is on the train and reading a paper on his way to work, and he sees an article on a heroin bust, and it is his brother that got arrested.

The narrator could not believe what was happening because this was his baby brother, who spent the whole day thinking about him (Baldwin 312). To better understand how they took separate courses on the life, we must first understand their childhood. They grew up in the ghetto with a father and mother in a poverty-stricken neighborhood with much violence. The narrator and Sonny's father would get drunk on the weekends, and even though their father loved them, he and Sonny did not get along. They did not have a good relationship and the reason why, as it states, "And this was partly because Sonny was the apple of his father's eye.

It was because he loved Sonny so much and was frightened for him, that he was always fighting with him." (Baldwin 320). I believe this was the starting reason for Sonny's downfall and course of life that led him to a life of drugs because of the lack of love, affirmation, and validation from the ones who were supposed to install it in him. We see the same behavior by the narrator when they get older regarding Sonny when he explains to the narrator that he wants to be a musician. The narrator struggles with fear and dismisses Sonny because of his mother's story about his father's brother, a singer who played guitar and was killed by some white men (Baldwin 322-323). As it is stated by Norton, "This kind of denial is a strategy for dealing with pain that many adults teach their children." (1). When we look deeper into it seems like the narrator is counter-transferring what happened to his father's brother and feels like the same will happen to his brother Sonny. I believe the fear projected by Sonny's father damaged him because instead of building Sonny up, he tore him down because of his fears, which set Sonny on a dark course, but even furthermore, the narrator seems to have that same mindset. Sadly, this is often a regular occurrence in African American and Hispanic cultures. When we project our fears onto our children because we think that we are doing them well, but we are doing them harm.

This can damage a child's psyche, and if it is not covered by love, then the child will grow up and secure with no validation and no guidance, and that is what we see with Sonny. I believe this has lasting effects on a child that grows up in this home environment with a combination of a world Environment can reap disaster. As Kim states in her article, "This essay close reads Baldwin's extended description of Harlem to reveal the power attributed to the ghetto. Baldwin tracks how disorder spreads from the streets into the buildings and back into the streets, creating a closed circuit of disorder in the neighborhood." (1). Kim is trying to unpack the tremendous power our environments have over us, whether good or bad, but, in this case, it is harmful. The article explains that growing up in this environment becomes a disorder and a vicious cycle that continues to circulate, and sadly this is what Sonny succumbed to. When you look at the behaviors of the narrator and his father toward Sonny, it can be summed up in one word "Trauma"

You might be asking, "What do you mean by trauma?" Moreover, my answer to that is straightforward; when you look at the narrator and his father, both men suffered trauma meaning pain that they have experienced that is familiar from the generation before them or a fear of going through that pain. This very thing may have damaged Sonny to get into drugs, and I first want to look at Sonny's father and analyze what trauma he may have gone through. Even though not much is said about Sonny and the narrator's father, the little we know is significantly impacted, and we can see how it could affect others. It is said that Sonny's father and Sonny's father's little brother were coming from a place where his little brother would sing and play guitar as they usually did because the little brother was a musician when a group of white men in a car ran his little brother over and killed him (Baldwin 322). The effect it had on them further impacted how he treated Sonny because maybe he seemed a small amount of his brother in

Sonny. McNally states in her book, "Sometimes intrusive recollections are so vivid that it seems as if the trauma is happening again. In these flashbacks, the person may see, hear, smell, or feel the original sensations while remembering the trauma" (106). Could the father have experienced this very thing, the trauma of his brother counter-transferring it to his son whom he loves and fear that he may lose him in the same way?

However, their father is not the only one who experienced trauma that may have scarred Sonny. But also the narrator, experienced trauma. The kind of trauma I believe the narrator experienced is called Vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma is defined as the emotional residue of being exposed to traumatic stories and experiences of others. We see this so evident in the narrator when it comes to Sonny. When the narrator and Sonny sit at the kitchen table after their mother's funeral, the narrator asks Sonny what he wants to do, and Sonny says he wants to be a musician (Baldwin 323). The narrator seems bothered and fearful at the same time that Sonny wants to be a musician, but why? I believe it is because the narrator is suffering from Vicarious trauma because of the story his mother told him about his father and his brother, who was a musician. I believe somewhere in the narrator's mind, he believes Sonny will suffer the same fate someday somehow, and maybe he is trying to deter Sonny from becoming a musician as a way of keeping his promise to his mother to keep his brother safe because he failed to do so the first time when he left.

As you can see, hurt people hurt people, which is what we see in this case. However, there is redemption in the story for Sonny because, although the opposition was against Sonny, he defeated all odds and continued to follow his dream to be a musician, even in the face of opposition. So what lessons can we learn from Sonny's life, good or bad? We learned that perseverance prevails; in Sonny's case, it prevailed through Music. While the narrator is

watching Sunny play the piano, the narrator has an epiphany that Sonny can take the pain, tragedy, and shortcomings and make it into a positive in music. Sonny had nothing left to fulfill him, but music and his story are stories of triumph that we should look upon in our struggles.

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