
Music Power And Brother Love In The Short Story Sonny's Blues

The dictionary defines music as "sound in time that expresses ideas or emotions in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, and color." Music gives even the most silent people a voice and is known to be one of the few coping mechanisms that doesn't have negative side effects. It is no surprise that music is a prominent feature in everyone's life because of this. Whether a person plays or just listens to music it can, if you let it, heal you from the inside out. James Baldwin highlights music's healing power through his character Sonny in his short story Sonny's Blues. Although Sonny and his brother have a rocky relationship at the start of the story due to the pressure installed in the Narrator's psyche by his mother, his growing relationship with music opens him to a new relationship with his brother, and himself.

To the narrator, jazz music represents his little brother being wrapped up in drugs and making poor decisions. Just after the death of the boy's mother, Sonny confides in his brother that he really wants to become a musician. The Narrator, having a predisposed opinion on jazz music, therefore refuses to listen to his brother's wishes. When Sonny comes to stay with him later in the story, he consistently infers as to his brother having a tendency to wrap music and drugs into the same package. He notes that Sonny's friends 'seem to shake themselves to pieces pretty...fast.' (Baldwin) Jazz music ends up dividing the brothers because of the Narrator's unwillingness to see the value it has in Sonny's life. For Sonny, music represents his freedom and passion. He is a talented musician, but his brother refuses to see that. Since his brother is so unwilling to accept the possibility of Sonny establishing himself in music, Sonny temporarily gives up on his goals in order to take a chance at pleasing his brother.

Music doesn't affect everyone in the same way. For Sonny, music is an emotion outlet, but for the Narrator, it is the impetus for a relationship with his younger brother. The Narrator did not realize growing up that simple cues such as his mother singing gospel songs or passerbys whistling would all just be foreshadowing for his relationship with music and ultimately his brother. Sonny's music is the main source of disagreements for the brothers. When the narrator asks Sonny what plans he has for the future while at their mother's funeral, Sonny tells his brother: "I want to play with-jazz musicians" (Baldwin). The narrator dismisses Sonny's dreams right off the bat and they continue to argue about it until parting ways. After letting music take such a toll on his relationship with his brother, Sonny is sad because he recognizes that his dream is a burden to the people he loves. His passion for music causes his brother a large amount of stress and pushes them apart.

Music is a huge source of conflict for these brothers yet, it also brings understanding. While Sonny is living with the Narrator, he invites him to attend one of his music concerts. Sonny is able to explain to his brother that music, is just a way to express his pain and release his fears and hardships. During the performance, the narrator comes to a realization that his brother has earned the respect of the people within the club because of his passion for music. He is a common figure among the people which brings a sense of comfort to the Narrator's mind. Throughout the night, the Narrator watches his younger brother play music, and becomes part of aware of it's meaning to Sonny.. He then understands that Sonny lets his problems emanate through his music and help him find inner peace. The narrator realizes that his brother is

managing to also give back to the society while expressing himself. He says “And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever” (Baldwin). This experience brings the Narrator to understand Sonny’s personality. He is finally proud of Sonny as a musician.

Music is the only way for Sonny to express himself. Throughout the story he struggles to communicate with his older brother who refuses to listen to him. The Narrator ultimately rejects Sonny’s passion for music which leaves them with a very broken relationship. The first time that the Narrator truly hears Sonny is during the conversation the brothers have after witnessing the street revival. Listening to the honest and beautiful singing of one of the women has opened the brothers to each other and allowed them to communicate. More dramatically, the narrator’s moment of redemption occurs while finally listening to his brother play in the jazz club, Sonny’s music allows him to understand his brother’s struggles and through them understand his own.

James Baldwin highlights the difficult relationship these brothers have and how the narrator slowly begins to recognize Sonny's relationship with music throughout the entirety of the short story. While the narrator is initially appalled by Sonny's dream to become a musician, towards the end of this short story, he finally recognizes that Sonny is only able to express himself through his music and that it is his driving force in his life, and his passion. While the narrator is at first apprehensive about contacting Sonny after his dark past, and because the brother had lost touch over the years, he eventually reaches out to Sonny and gains insight into what Sonny had been doing during their estrangement. During that time, that the narrator recognizes that music is not only an artistic outlet for Sonny, but also provides an emotional and psychological outlet for him. He also acknowledges that, for those that listen to Sonny’s music, Sonny is their outlet.

Communication through music is not close to a new practice, many religions also use music as a form of expressing their devotion or coping with their struggles. Just as Christians use their gospels in order to communicate their faith and express their devotion to one another, Sonny uses his music to show not only his faith but furthermore express his pain. It is Sonny’s music that brings the Narrator to deal with his repressed feelings. It is not hard to see that without the Narrator deciding to step into the “light” (Baldwin) and letting Sonny’s music resonate with him he never would have faced his pain. Without music these brothers never would have reconciled or made it away from their individual addictions. Music intertwines all of our lives together, these brothers discovered this first hand.