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“*Sonny’s Blues*”:  
*James Baldwin’s Image of Black Community*

A critical commonplace holds that James Baldwin writes better essays than he does fiction or drama; nevertheless, his leading theme—the discovery of identity—is nowhere presented more successfully than in the short story “Sonny’s Blues.” Originally published in *Partisan Review* in 1957 and reprinted in the collection of stories *Going to Meet the Man* in 1965, “Sonny’s Blues” not only states dramatically the motive for Baldwin’s famous polemics in the cause of Black freedom, but it also provides an esthetic linking his work, in all literary genres, with the cultures of the Black ghetto.<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental movement of “Sonny’s Blues” represents the slow accommodation of a first-person narrator’s consciousness to the meaning of his younger brother’s way of life. The process leads Baldwin’s readers to a sympathetic engagement with the young man by providing a knowledge of the human motives of the youths whose lives normally are reported to others only by their inclusion in statistics of school dropout rates, drug usage, and unemployment.

The basis of the story, however, and its relationship to the purpose of Baldwin’s writing generally, lies in his use of the Blues as a key metaphor. The unique quality of the Blues is its combination of personal and social significance in a lyric encounter with history. “The Blues-singer describes first-person experiences, but only such as are typical of the community and

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such as each individual in the community might have. The singer never sets himself against the community or raises himself above it.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the story of Sonny and his brother an intuition of the meaning of the Blues repairs the relationship between the two men who have chosen different ways to cope with the menacing ghetto environment, and their reconciliation through the medium of this Afro-American musical form extends the meaning of the individual’s Blues until it becomes a metaphor of Black community.

Sonny’s life explodes into his older brother’s awareness when the story of his arrest for peddling and using heroin is reported in the newspaper. Significantly the mass medium of the newspaper with the impersonal story in it of a police bust is the only way the brothers have of communicating at the opening of the story. While the narrator says that because of the newspaper report Sonny “became real to me again,” their relationship is only vestigially personal, for he “couldn’t find any room” for the news “anywhere inside ...” (P. 103)

While he had had his suspicions about how Sonny was spending his life, the narrator had put them aside with rationalizations about how Sonny was, after all, a good kid. Nothing to worry about. In short, the storyteller reveals that along with his respectable job as an algebra teacher he had assumed a conventional way of thinking as a defense against recognizing that his own brother ran the risk of “coming to nothing.” Provoked by the facts of Sonny’s arrest to observe his students, since they are the same age as Sonny must have been when he first had heroin, he notices for the first time that their laughter is disenchanted rather than good-humored. In it he hears his brother, and perhaps himself. At this point in the story his opinion is evidently that Sonny and many of the young students are beaten and he, fortunately, is not.

The conventionality of the narrator’s attitude becomes clearer when he encounters a nameless friend of Sonny’s, a boy from the block who fears he may have touted Sonny onto heroin by telling him, truthfully, how great it made him feel to be high. This man who “still spent hours on the street corner ... high and raggy” explains what will happen to Sonny because of his arrest. After they send him someplace and try to cure him, they’ll let Sonny loose, that’s all. Trying to grasp the implication the narrator asks: “You mean he’ll never kick the habit. Is that what you mean?” He feels there should be some kind of renewal, some hope. A man should be able to bring himself up by his will, convention says. Convention also says that behavior like Sonny’s is deliberately self-destructive. “Tell me,” he asks the friend, “why does he want to die?” Wrong again. “Don’t nobody want to die,” says the friend, “ever.” (P. 108)

Agitated though he is about Sonny’s fate the narrator doesn’t want to feel himself involved. His own position on the middle-class ladder of success

is not secure, and the supporting patterns of thought in his mind are actually rather weak. Listening to the nameless friend explain about Sonny while they stand together in front of a bar blasting “black and bouncy” music from its door, he senses something that frightens him. “All this was carrying me some place I didn’t want to go. I certainly didn’t want to know how it felt. It filled everything, the people, the houses, the music, the dark, quicksilver barmaid, with menace; and this menace was their reality.” (P. 107)

Eventually a great personal pain—the loss of a young daughter—breaks through the narrator’s defenses and makes him seek out his brother, more for his own comfort than for Sonny’s. “My trouble made his real,” he says. In that remark is a prefiguring of the meaning the Blues will develop.

It is only a prefiguring, however, for the time Sonny is released from the state institution where he had been confined, the narrator’s immediate need for comfort has passed. When he meets Sonny he is in control of himself, but very shortly he is flooded with complex feelings that make him feel again the menace of the 110th Street bar where he had stood with Sonny’s friend. There is no escaping a feeling of icy dread, so he must try to understand.

As the narrator casts his mind back over his and Sonny’s past, he gradually identifies sources of his feelings. First he recalls their parents, especially concentrating on an image of his family on a typical Sunday. The scene is one of security amidst portentousness. The adults sit without talking, “but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside.” The children sit about, maybe one half asleep and another being stroked on the head by an adult. The darkness frightens a child and he hopes “that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop.” The child knows, however, that it will end, and now grown-up he recalls one of the meanings of the darkness is in the story his mother told him of the death of his uncle, run over on a dark country road by a car full of drunken white men. Never had his companion, the boy’s father, “seen anything as dark as that road after the lights of the car had gone away.” The narrator’s mother had attempted to apply her tale of his father’s grief at the death of his own brother to the needs of their sons. They can’t protect each other, she knows, “but,” she says to the narrator about Sonny, “you got to let him know you’s *there*.” (P. 119)

Thus, guilt for not fulfilling their mother’s request and a sense of shared loneliness partially explain the older brother’s feeling toward Sonny. Once again, however, Baldwin stresses the place of the conventional set of the narrator’s mind in the complex of feelings as he has him recall scenes from the time when Sonny had started to become a jazz musician. The possibility of Sonny’s being a jazz rather than a classical musician had “seemed—beneath him, somehow.” Trying to understand the ambition, the narrator had asked if Sonny meant to play like Louis Armstrong, only to be told that Charlie

Parker was the model. Hard as it is to believe, he had never heard of Bird until Sonny mentioned him. This ignorance reveals more than a gap between fraternal generations. It represents a cultural chasm. The narrator's inability to understand Sonny's choice of a musical leader shows his alienation from the mood of the post-war bebop subculture. In its hip style of dress, its repudiation of middle-brow norms, and its celebration of esoteric manner the bebop subculture made overtly evident its underlying significance as an assertion of Black identity. Building upon a restatement of Afro-American music, bebop became an expression of a new self-awareness in the ghettos by a strategy of elaborate nonconformity. In committing himself to the bebop subculture Sonny attempted to make a virtue of the necessity of the isolation imposed upon him by his color. In contrast, the narrator's failure to understand what Sonny was doing indicates that his response to the conditions imposed upon him by racial status was to try to assimilate himself as well as he could into the mainstream American culture. For the one, heroin addiction sealed his membership in the exclusive group; for the other, adoption of individualistic attitudes marked his allegiance to the historically familiar ideal of transcending caste distinctions by entering into the middle class.

Following his way, Sonny became wrapped in the vision that rose from his piano, stopped attending school, and hung around with a group of musicians in Greenwich Village. His musical friends became Sonny's family, replacing the brother who had felt that Sonny's choice of his style of life was the same thing as dying, and for all practical purposes the brothers were dead to each other in the extended separation before Sonny's arrest on narcotics charges.

The thoughts revealing the brothers' family history and locating the sources of the narrator's complex feelings about Sonny all occur in the period after Sonny is released from the state institution. Though he has ceased to evade thoughts of their relationship, as he had done in the years when they were separated and had partially continued to do after Sonny's arrest, the narrator has a way to go before he can become reconciled to Sonny. His recollections of the past only provide his consciousness with raw feeling.

The next development—perception—begins with a scene of a revival meeting conducted on the sidewalk of Seventh Avenue, beneath the narrator's window. Everyone on the street has been watching such meetings all his life, but the narrator from his window, passersby on the street, and Sonny from the edge of the crowd all watch again. It isn't because they expect something different this time. Rather it is a familiar moment of communion for them. In basic humanity one of the sanctified sisters resembles the down-and-outer watching her, "a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings.... Perhaps,"

the narrator thinks, “they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister.” (P. 129) The point impresses both the narrator and Sonny, men who should call one another “Brother,” for the music of the revivalists seems to “soothe a poison” out of them.

The perception of this moment extends nearly to conception in the conversation between the narrator and Sonny that follows it. It isn’t a comfortable discussion. The narrator still is inclined to voice moral judgments of the experiences and people Sonny tries to talk about, but he is making an honest effort to relate to his brother now and reminds himself to be quiet and listen. What he hears is that Sonny equates the feeling of hearing the revivalist sister sing with the sensation of heroin in the veins. “It makes you feel—in control. Sometimes you got to have that feeling.” (P. 131) It isn’t primarily drugs that Sonny is talking about, though, and when the narrator curbs his tongue to let him go on, Sonny explains the real subject of his thoughts.

Again, the facts of Sonny’s experience contradict the opinion of “respectable” people. He did not use drugs to escape from suffering, he says. He knows as well as anyone that there’s no way to avoid suffering, but what you can do is “try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it, to keep on top of it, and to make it seem ... like *you*.” That is, Sonny explains, you can earn your suffering, make it seem “like you did something ... and now you’re suffering for it.” (P. 132)

The idea of meriting your suffering is a staggering one. In the face of it the narrator’s inclination to talk about “will power and how life could be—well, beautiful,” is blunted, because he senses that by directly confronting degradation Sonny has asserted what degree of will was possible to him, and perhaps that kept him alive.

At this point in the story it is clear that there are two themes emerging. The first is the theme of the individualistic narrator’s gradual discovery of the significance of his brother’s life. This theme moves to a climax in the final scene of the story when Sonny’s music impresses the narrator with a sense of the profound feeling it contains. From the perspective of that final scene, however, the significance of the Blues itself becomes a powerful theme.

The insight into suffering that Sonny displays establishes his priority in knowledge. Thus, he reverses the original relationship between the brothers, assumes the role of the elder, and proceeds to lead his brother, by means of the Blues, to a discovery of self in community.

As the brothers enter the jazz club where Sonny is to play, he becomes special. Everyone has been waiting for him, and each greets him familiarly. Equally special is the setting—dark except for a spotlight which the musicians

approach as if it were a circle of flame. This is a sanctified spot where Sonny is to testify to the power of souls to commune in the Blues.

Baldwin explicates the formula of the Blues by tracing the narrator's thoughts while Sonny plays. Many people, he thinks, don't really hear music being played except so far as they invest it with "personal, private, vanishing evocations." He might be thinking of himself, referring to his having come to think of Sonny through the suffering of his own personal loss. The man who makes the music engages in a spiritual creation, and when he succeeds, the creation belongs to all present, "his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours." (P. 137)

In the first set Sonny doesn't triumph, but in the second, appropriately begun by "Am I Blue," he takes the lead and begins to form a musical creation. He becomes, in the narrator's words, "part of the family again." (P. 139) What family? First of all that of his fellow musicians. Then, of course, the narrator means to say that their fraternal relationship is at last fulfilled as their mother hoped it to be. But there is yet a broader meaning too. Like the sisters at the Seventh Avenue revival meeting Sonny and the band are not saying anything new. Still they are keeping the Blues alive by expanding it beyond the personal lyric into a statement of the glorious capacity of human beings to take the worst and give it a form of their own choosing.

At this point the narrator synthesizes feelings and perception into a conception of the Blues. He realizes Sonny's Blues can help everyone who listens be free, in his own case free of the conventions that had alienated him from Sonny and that dimension of Black culture represented in Sonny's style of living. Yet at the same time he knows the world outside of the Blues moment remains hostile.

The implicit statement of the esthetics of the Blues in this story throws light upon much of Baldwin's writing. The first proposition of the esthetics that we can infer from "Sonny's Blues" is that suffering is the prior necessity. Integrity of expression comes from "paying your dues." This is a point Baldwin previously made in *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and which he elaborated in the novel *Another Country* (1962).

The second implicit proposition of the Blues esthetics is that while the form is what it's all about, the form is transitory. The Blues is an art in process and in that respect alien from any conception of fixed and ideal forms. This will not justify weaknesses in an artist's work, but insofar as Baldwin identifies his writing with the art of the singers of Blues it suggests why he is devoted to representation, in whatever genre, of successive moments of expressive feeling and comparatively less concerned with achieving a consistent overall structure.

The final proposition of the esthetics in the story “Sonny’s Blues” is that the Blues functions as an art of communion. It is popular rather than elite, worldly rather than otherwise. The Blues is expression in which one uses the skill he has achieved by practice and experience in order to reach toward others. It is this proposition that gives the Blues its metaphoric significance. The fraternal reconciliation brought about through Sonny’s music is emblematic of a group’s coming together, because the narrator learns to love his brother freely while he discovers the value of a characteristically Afro-American assertion of life-force. Taking Sonny on his own terms he must also abandon the ways of thought identified with middle-class position which historically has signified for Black people the adoption of “white” ways.

An outstanding quality of the Black literary tradition in America is its attention to the interdependence of personal and social experience. Obviously necessity has fostered this virtue. Black authors cannot luxuriate in the assumption that there is such a thing as a purely private life. James Baldwin significantly adds to this aspect of the tradition in “Sonny’s Blues” by showing that artful expression of personal yet typical experience is one way to freedom.

#### NOTES

1. James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues,” *Partisan Review* 24 (Summer, 1957): 327–58. And in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Dial Press, 1965), pp. 103–41. Citations in the text are from the latter publication of the story.

2. Janheinz Jahn, *Neo-African Literature: A History of Black Writing*, trans. Oliver Coburn and Ursula Lehrburger (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 166