

Sonny's Blues Study Guide



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Summary

The narrator, a teacher in Harlem, has escaped the ghetto, creating a stable and secure life for himself despite the destructive pressures that he sees destroying so many young blacks. He sees African American adolescents discovering the limits placed on them by a racist society at the very moment when they are discovering their abilities. He tells the story of his relationship with his younger brother, Sonny. That relationship has moved through phases of separation and return. After their parents' deaths, he tried and failed to be a father to Sonny. For a while, he believed that Sonny had succumbed to the destructive influences of Harlem life. Finally, however, they achieved a reconciliation in which the narrator came to understand the value and the importance of Sonny's need to be a jazz pianist.

The story opens with a crisis in their relationship. The narrator reads in the newspaper that Sonny was taken into custody in a drug raid. He learns that Sonny is addicted to heroin and that he will be sent to a treatment facility to be "cured." Unable to believe that his gentle and quiet brother could have so abused himself, the narrator cannot reopen communication with Sonny until a second crisis occurs, the death of his daughter from polio. When Sonny is released, the narrator brings him to live with his family.

The middle section of the story is a flashback. The narrator remembers his last talk with his mother, in which she made him promise to "be there" for Sonny. Home on leave from the army, he has seen little of Sonny, who is then in school. His mother tells him about the death of his uncle, a story she had kept from him until this moment. His uncle, much loved by his father, was killed in a hit-and-run accident by a group of drunken whites who miscalculated in an attempt to frighten the young man. The pain, sorrow, and rage this event aroused colored his father's whole life, especially his relationship with Sonny, who reminded him of his brother. She tells the narrator this story partly in order to illustrate that there is no safety from suffering in their world. The narrator cannot protect Sonny from the world any more than his father could protect his own brother. Such suffering is a manifestation of the general chaos of life out of which people struggle to create some order and meaning. Though suffering cannot be avoided, one can struggle against it, and one can support others in their struggles.

From this conversation, the narrator brings the story forward through his marriage and return to the army; Sonny's announcement at their mother's funeral that he intends to be a jazz pianist; Sonny's attempt to live with the narrator's wife's family, teaching himself piano while the narrator is away at war; the failure of this arrangement; Sonny's term in the navy; and, after the war, a final break between the brothers because of the narrator's inability to accept Sonny's way of life. The narrator then explains the suffering he and his wife felt at the death of their daughter, suffering that made him want to write to Sonny at the treatment center and that finally began to make him appreciate the importance of having someone to talk to, a source of comfort in suffering.

In the final third of the story, the narrator and Sonny come to an understanding that seems to reconcile them. The narrator is very worried that Sonny will return to heroin. Sonny invites the narrator to hear him play piano with a group in a Greenwich Village club. When the narrator accepts this invitation, Sonny tries to explain why he took heroin. Heroin is a way to try not to suffer, a way to take control of inner chaos and to find shelter from outer suffering. Though he knows that ultimately heroin cannot work, he also knows that he may try it again. He implies that with someone to listen to him, he may succeed in dealing with “the storm inside” by means of his music: 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 realize nobody’s listening. So you’ve got to listen. You got to find a way to listen.

At the nightclub, the narrator understands what Sonny means when he finally hears him play. He sees that Sonny’s music is an authentic response to life. He sees that one who creates music “is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air.” He understands that his brother’s music is an attempt to renew the old human story: “For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness.” Having witnessed Sonny’s struggle to play “his blues,” the narrator recognizes that those blues are humankind’s blues, that Sonny’s music gives the narrator and all people a way of finding meaning in their pains and joys. This perception enables the narrator to accept his brother, the life he has chosen, and the risks he must incur.

Additional Summary: Summary

"Sonny's Blues" opens as the narrator learns from a newspaper that his younger brother, Sonny, has been arrested for dealing heroin. The narrator is taking the subway to his high-school teaching job. At the end of the school day, the "insular and mocking" laughter of his students reminds him that as youths he and Sonny had been filled with rage and had known "two darknesses"—the one of their lives and the one of the movies that made them momentarily forget about their lives. Leaving the school, the narrator comes across an old friend of Sonny's in the school yard.

While Sonny's friend and the narrator talk about Sonny's arrest, they tell each other some of their fears. In front of a bar that blasts "black and bouncy" music, the friend, who is not given a name, says that he "can't much help old Sonny no more." This angers the narrator because it reminds him that he himself had given up trying to help his brother because he had not known how; indeed, he had not even seen Sonny in a year. It disturbs the narrator to see his situation shared by someone who is not even related to Sonny. The friend mentions that he thought Sonny was too smart to get caught in a drug bust. In anger, the narrator criticizes the friend, sarcastically implying that the friend must have been smarter since he had not been arrested himself. The friend pauses and replies that he would have killed himself a long time ago if he were really smart, implying that he believes death is better than addiction. He then begins to explain to the older brother how he feels responsible for turning Sonny onto drugs, but the narrator breaks in and asks what will happen to Sonny next. The friend says that Sonny will be sent to a place where they will try and cure him and then he will be let loose to start his habit again. When the narrator questions why nothing else will occur, the friend's response shows how separate Sonny and his brother are. The narrator asks why Sonny wants to die and is told that "don't nobody want to die ever." The two men part after the narrator gives the friend five dollars when the friend asks for change.

The narrator does not get in touch with his brother for a long time. After his daughter dies, he realizes he had begun to wonder about him. The narrator wonders if the seven-year age difference between himself and Sonny can ever be bridged. He meets with Sonny after Sonny gets out of prison. At Sonny's request, they take a long cab ride around the elegant city before heading to the "vivid, killing streets" of their childhood where

they each remember leaving part of themselves behind. The narrator begins to flashback to the childhood he and Sonny shared. The reader sees the family on a typical Sunday evening. As the skies darken, the adults sit quietly with faces darkening like the sky. The children are somewhat frightened as they witness this, and one hopes that the "hand which strokes his forehead will never stop."

Immediately following this scene readers see the narrator and his mother in conversation. The narrator learns for the first time that his father had a brother who was killed by a car full of drunk white men. The narrator's mother tells the story to let him know how important he and his brother are to each other and how he, as the older, more stable one, needs to let Sonny know he is "there" for Sonny. The narrator experiences a pang of guilt as he reflects on not having done as his mother asked, but he also remembers that Sonny's choice of being a jazz musician instead of a classical one "seemed—beneath him, somehow." The narrator relates the time when he asked Sonny to play like Louis Armstrong did, and Sonny told him that Charlie Parker was his model instead. This emphasizes the different lives the brothers are leading.

The narrator witnesses a revival scene from his window that sets him on the road to understanding his brother. Sonny watches the same scene from the sidewalk, and both are struck by the fact that the women in the meeting "addressed each other as Sister." This leads to a conversation between the brothers where, for the first time, the narrator tries to understand his brother's point of view. When Sonny tells him that the revival meeting reminded him of how in control he felt with heroin, the narrator realizes that Sonny is actually speaking of something much greater. Here it is learned that Sonny uses drugs to "keep from drowning in" the suffering all humans have to go through. He explains that in order to gain anything or learn anything from the suffering, there needs to be a way to make it your own. For Sonny, heroin accomplishes this, as does jazz.

The narrator goes with Sonny to a jazz club. Sonny is going to play and everyone there greets him with expectation. The club is dark, except for a spotlight on the musicians. While Sonny plays, the narrator defines the blues as something "personal and private." Sonny plays a set that the narrator understands is not the best he can do; he watches the older musician give Sonny room to take the lead but Sonny ignores it until later in the next set. As he begins to play "Am I Blue," Sonny takes control of the music, and becomes "part of a family again." At the end of the set, the narrator realizes that the music has helped Sonny to stay free and avoid drowning in his suffering. Furthermore, the narrator recognizes that the blues can help everyone be true to what and who they are.

Themes: Themes and Meanings

As the narrator feels united with his brother and, by implication, with all humankind in shared sorrows, he reflects, "And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky." This opposition between moments of meaning in loving community and the terrifying, troubled, and apparently meaningless outside world pervades the story in theme and in technique.

The opposition appears in multiple guises. It appears in the housing project where the narrator lives, an attempt to impose order on the old dangerous neighborhood that fails when the project is transformed into merely a new version of the old dangerous neighborhood. The opposition is reflected in his memories of childhood, of being secure in families, not having yet to deal with the horrors of the world, and yet being aware even as a child, that with each passing moment, he came closer to having to live unprotected in the dark, chaotic world. It appears in the story of the death of his uncle: On a warm, beautiful night when the brothers were walking, enjoying each other's company, a wild car suddenly swooped over a hill, to destroy a beloved brother. For African Americans in the middle of the twentieth century, racism is another of the dark forces of destruction and meaninglessness that must be endured. Beauty, joy, triumph, security, suffering, and sorrow are all creations of community, especially of family and familylike groups. They are temporary havens

from the world's trouble, and they are also the meanings of human life.

The narrator and Sonny have found alternative ways of making meaning and order. The narrator makes a literal family and a conventional career, as his father did. Sonny becomes an artist, one who expresses for himself and his community and to himself and his community the passions that unite them. By expressing these passions, giving them order in articulation and making them meaningful, he also makes and sustains a kind of family, a community of shared moments of meaning.

James Baldwin often deals with these themes in his fiction and other prose, especially with the problems of the black artist or intellectual trying to find or create a sustaining community.

Themes

In "Sonny's Blues," a man finally comes to understand the darkness and suffering that consumes his brother, and he begins to appreciate the music that his brother uses to calm those blues.

Suffering

The main theme of "Sonny's Blues" is suffering, particularly the sufferings of black people in America. Although Baldwin presents only one example of overt racism in the story—the death of Sonny's uncle under the wheels of a car driven by a group of drunken whites—the repercussions of the treatment received by black people is omnipresent. Sonny's father is tormented by the memory of his brother's death and suffers from a hatred of white people as a result. This hatred, Baldwin suggests, warps his soul. Sonny's mother also suffers from the harshness of life in Harlem and from her knowledge that her younger son feels this suffering more strongly than most.

Sonny's brother, the narrator of the story, also suffers. Although he tries to block them out, the blues become apparent in the darkness that he sees everywhere, even in his students. He imagines them using heroin in the bathroom between classes and says that "their laughter ... was not the joyous laughter which—God knows why—one associates with children." For him, childhood has no joy.

His neighborhood, too, is "filled with a hidden menace" that the new housing project in which he and his wife live cannot hide. "It looks like a parody of the good, clean, faceless life—God knows the people who live in it do their best to make it a parody ... The minute Sonny and I started into the house I had the feeling that I was simply bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape."

Baldwin makes Sonny's blues the focus of the story. Sonny has not experienced anything significantly more traumatic than his brother has, but he feels it more intensely. Sonny always "moved ... in a distant stillness," his brother says. For that reason, his mother urges his brother to watch out for him. "You may not be able to stop nothing from happening. But you got to let him know you's there."

For Sonny, heroin is a seductive outlet for his blues, but he knows that in the end it will kill him. Sonny is looking for a way to conceal the blues within him but admits in a letter to his brother that "trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped." Music promises freedom from these blues, though, and during Sonny's solo at the end of the story his brother sees this: "he could help us to be free if we would just listen, that he would never be free until we did. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth."

Race and Racism

The fact that race is only a contributing factor in Sonny's blues is characteristic of Baldwin's beliefs. For him, the fact that he was black formed only part of his identity but did not ultimately define him. Similarly, Sonny's

blues result in large part from the circumstances of his race—his upbringing in Harlem, the temptations of the streets, and the limits on his economic opportunity—but they also result from the natural human obligation to suffer. Additionally, the biblical reference at the end of the story serves to universalize Sonny's troubles.

The history of oppression that blacks in America have suffered, however, certainly informs Sonny's blues. This history is made distinctly personal when Sonny's brother hears how his uncle died—run over by drunk white men in the South. Sonny's brother also reminds readers of the circumstances of black people in the city when he details the poverty and neglect in his Harlem neighborhood.

Art and Expression

Baldwin believed in the power of art to save people from suffering, or at least to minimize their suffering. Correspondingly, Sonny uses blues and jazz as an outlet for his feelings, an outlet which his brother at first does not understand. Once Sonny's brother visits the jazz club and hears Sonny play, however, he begins to comprehend the power and importance of music in Sonny's life.

Themes

Although Sonny first tries to relieve his pain by submitting to the mind-numbing effects of heroin, he almost simultaneously discovers that playing jazz provides him with a similar kind of escape from his worldly troubles. Baldwin makes a powerful statement about the affirmative and recuperative value of creativity, and "music," therefore, functions thematically on several levels. First, it provides a means by which Sonny can express his rage in a less self-destructive manner; second, because he is not an articulate speaker, music gives Sonny a non-linguistic medium through which to voice his feelings to his brother and thus re-establish family bonds which had been severely strained; and third, the music itself becomes a way to transmit the larger, historical story of the African-American experience.

When the narrator (who is ignorant, and even suspicious, of jazz) finally agrees to hear Sonny and his band play, he has an epiphany about the power of music as a means of communicating a shared experience. "He and his boys were up there keeping it new," he writes,

At the risk of ruin, destruction, madness and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

As the narrator gets swept up in the awesome majesty of his brother's music, his thoughts move from a meditation on freedom to recollections of his family:

I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and 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. Yet, there was no battle in his face now. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever.

Jazz becomes, for the narrator, a medium through which to chart an African-American genealogy. In this way, the re-emergent fraternal bond between the brothers—the love they find for one another—stands metaphorically for the need to re-connect with others in order to establish solidarity and community.

The narrator realizes that music can tell a story of outrage and redemption, and just as Sonny is able to exorcize his demons on the piano, so too does Baldwin, through the very act of writing this story, create an analogous tale of suffering and salvation.

Characters

The age difference between Sonny and his older brother is crucial because the narrator initially has difficulty understanding the aspirations and weaknesses of his sibling. (And the parable of the prodigal son and the biblical refrain of "my brother's keeper" should resonate for many readers of this text.) The narrator is a high school algebra teacher, a home owner, and a family man, whereas Sonny drifts from place to place—at one time living with his brother, at another time staying with a white woman in Greenwich Village. Despite the significant differences between the two men, however, they are quite similar in the desire to escape their shared past. This is made evident in the narrator's thoughts upon those who live like animals in the housing tenements of Harlem. As he looks out his cab window while escorting Sonny back from prison, he muses:

Some escaped the trap, most didn't. Those who got out always left something of themselves behind, as some animals amputate a leg and leave it in the trap. It might be said, perhaps, that I had escaped, after all, I was a school teacher; or that Sonny had, he hadn't lived in Harlem for years. Yet, as the cab moved uptown through streets which seemed, with a rush, to darken with dark people, and as I covertly studied Sonny's face/it came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind. It's always at the hour of trouble and confrontation that the missing member aches.

The space of Harlem then is contrasted with the space of the nightclub: one is claustrophobic and threatening, the other open and inviting. It is in the club where the narrator realizes, "Here I was in Sonny's world. Or, rather, his kingdom. It was not ever a question that his veins bore royal blood."

Although Baldwin focuses upon the relationship between two brothers, the introduction of peripheral characters serves to deepen the story's emotional charge. The death of the narrator's daughter Grace, of polio, instills in him an extreme sense of guilt which is then displaced onto his feelings about his brother and thus serves as a trigger to re-establish fraternal bonds. Of Sonny's fellow musicians, the bass player Creole functions as a kind of surrogate brother to Sonny, instructing him in the language of the blues.

Character Analysis: Sonny

Although the story is narrated by Sonny's unnamed older brother, Sonny is the most important character. Sonny is described in a common stereotype of the time, a stereotype that his own brother holds until the end of the story: the heroin-addicted jazz musician. Sonny has just been arrested for "peddling and using heroin" and must do time in a prison upstate.

As the story progresses, however, the reader learns more about Sonny's life before the arrest. He was the "apple of his father's eye," but in his youth he always had a tendency to stray from what his family thought would be the safe route. He decides that he wants to be a jazz musician, a choice that his brother finds regrettable. Sonny takes his music very seriously, and for a time he lives with his sister-in-law's family while his brother is in the army. He takes his music so seriously that the family finds him strange—"it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound."

Sonny and his brother fight periodically and are utterly unable to understand each other until Sonny returns from prison and his brother finally goes to Greenwich Village to hear Sonny play. A man named Creole leads the band, and Sonny admires his control of the music they play. As Sonny plays the piano in the jazz club, his

brother begins to understand the deep suffering and the blues that have always preoccupied Sonny.

Character Analysis: Other Characters

Creole

Creole is a bass player who leads the band that Sonny plays in at the end of the story. He functions as a kind of father figure for Sonny; he believes it is his purpose to guide Sonny through his blues and teach him how to turn them into music. He also attempts to show Sonny's brother how to understand Sonny.

Sonny's Brother

The experiences of Sonny are shown through the eyes of the story's narrator, Sonny's brother. The unnamed narrator is a high school algebra teacher who grew up in Harlem but has made an attempt to escape its cruel streets by getting a good job and integrating himself, as best he can, into white society. In subtle ways, however, he has internalized many of the prejudices of that society. When Sonny tells him that he wants to be a musician, his brother immediately assumes that this means a classical musician. After it becomes clear that Sonny wants to play jazz—a traditionally black genre—his brother thinks that "it seemed—beneath him, somehow."

While Sonny has allowed his blues to dominate his life, his brother has internalized his own blues; only rarely do they make it to the surface. He is married to a woman named Isabel and seems happy, although one of their children dies while Sonny is in jail. He looks upon the streets of Harlem as a place he has left behind, but he is still comfortable there. He feels the blues that possess Sonny, but his moderate success has allowed him to keep them deep down inside himself.

Sonny's Father

Sonny's father dies "during a drunken weekend in the middle of the war" when Sonny is fifteen. Little is revealed about him except that he was very strict with Sonny because his younger son was "the apple of his eye." The father's own brother was killed by a drunken group of white men long ago in the South. After that point, the mother tells Sonny's brother, "he weren't sure but that every white man he saw was the man that killed his brother."

Sonny's Mother

Sonny's mother dies while Sonny is in school and his brother is still in the army, but she had already charged Sonny's brother with Sonny's care. "You got to hold on to your brother," she tells him in their last moments together, "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." Sonny's brother accepts her request until Sonny begins to spend time downtown with jazz musicians.

Critical Essays: Critical Overview

Though Baldwin published "Sonny's Blues" as part of his only story collection, *Going to Meet the Man*, in 1965, the story had appeared in a periodical several years before. While stories in periodicals are generally not reviewed, the magazine in which "Sonny's Blues" appeared does give some indication of Baldwin's place in the literary world at that time. "Sonny's Blues" led off the summer, 1957, issue of *Partisan Review*, which at the time was of America's leading journals of culture and politics. Baldwin's story was longer than most stories and was given the prestigious first position in the magazine, demonstrating the respect that the magazine's editors felt Baldwin deserved.

Baldwin had long been a figure in New York's intellectual community. He had moved to Greenwich Village from Harlem in 1944, where he met Richard Wright, then America's most important black writer. Baldwin

wrote for the *Nation* and the *New Leader* while in the Village, before moving to Paris in 1948. During the 1940s and early 1950s, he received fellowships and grants from important cultural organizations and wrote for major American magazines while producing important works of drama, fiction, and nonfiction.

Baldwin's work was almost immediately lauded by the critics. His 1953 novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* announced the presence of a major American writer. Another book of the same time, *Notes of a Native Son*, was a collection of essays primarily concentrating on questions of race in America. Baldwin claimed Wright's mantle as the most important black writer in America. His next novel, however, went in a direction that critics were not expecting and reviews were negative. *Giovanni's Room* tells the story of a love affair between a white American student in Paris and an Italian bartender. Its frank depiction of homosexuality signaled Baldwin's acceptance of his own sexual orientation but alienated many readers and critics. Baldwin continued to write about life as a gay man throughout his career. By the late 1950s it had almost become a "critical commonplace," according to John M. Reilly in *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, that Baldwin's nonfiction was of superior quality to his fiction and the plays that he wrote.

In 1965, Baldwin published *Going to Meet the Man*, and critics began to write about "Sonny's Blues." The story, like Baldwin's career itself, was viewed from opposing perspectives: critics either reviewed it as a story specifically about the black experience in America or about suffering's role in the human condition. Whichever side of this debate a critic came down on, though, almost all critics agreed that "Sonny's Blues" was a major accomplishment in the short story form. "Nearly every word, every gesture in it, adds up toward the meeting of form, theme and meaning," Stanley Macebuh held in *James Baldwin: A Critical Study*. Macebuh went on to state that "the meaning of the story is to be found in its structure ... of a blues song," in which there are no "profundities of thought" or "events that are in themselves of cataclysmic import," but simply a "ritualistic repetition of feeling, emotion and mood."

Louis H. Pratt took the opposite viewpoint, believing that "Sonny's Blues" is specifically a black story. He asserted in *James Baldwin* that the stories in *Going to Meet the Man* all deal with the "insurmountable fears—conscious and unconscious—which grow out of the experience of being black in a white-oriented society." To overcome these fears, Pratt believed, Baldwin's characters must "open a line of communication with the past." "This channel can be opened only through personal suffering," Pratt concluded. Where Sonny already has this channel open and is using the blues to overcome his fears and his suffering, Sonny's brother must experience the death of his daughter first in order to open himself up to the blues.

Reilly, in *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, believed that the story "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 genres, with the cultures of the Black ghetto." For Reilly, as for Pratt, Baldwin's story is essentially an African-American one.

More recent critics have taken different approaches to the story. Patricia R. Robertson, in *The University of Mississippi Studies in English*, examined the religious grounding of the story, while Suzy Bernstein Goldman, in *Negro American Literature Forum*, discussed jazz and blues parallels. In the last few years, the most popular approach to Baldwin's work has been an examination of his themes of homosexuality, but few of those articles deal with "Sonny's Blues." In general, the critics agree that "Sonny's Blues" is a masterpiece of the short story form, one in which Baldwin demonstrates his ability to illustrate the relationship between seemingly "black" literature and American literature.

Essays and Criticism: Racial Issues in "Sonny's Blues"

Each of us wants to live a life where we feel fulfilled and joyous. A few of us accomplish this with seemingly little effort; others struggle on their journey through periods of self-doubt, rejection, depression, or the blues.

James Baldwin was no different; yet while he struggled toward his own individual fulfillment, he began to feel a driving need to tie the idea of individual effort and fulfillment to the black race. In fact, according to C.W.E. Bigsby, editor of *The Black American Writer*, the central point of conflict in much of Baldwin's writing is to show that "the job of ethnic renewal [lies] in individual fulfillment rather than racial separatism or political revolution."

Putting emphasis on the individual is also a way to portray blacks as unique "members of a community with its own traditions and values," according to Irving Howe in *Dissent*. In part, this emphasis stems from racial bias against blacks. It also stems, however, from the realization that with the Harlem Renaissance, the black "writer has come to appreciate the relevance of his own experience to a nation searching for its own sense of identity and purpose," according to Bigsby. For these reasons, the times and community in which Baldwin grew up become important. They contributed to his need to find how "the specialness of [his] experience could be made to connect [him] to other people instead of dividing [him] from them."

Baldwin's early experiences became integral to his writings. The eldest of nine children, he was born in 1924 in Harlem to a preacher and his wife. At that time, Harlem was the country's largest black community. It was home to many blacks who had come North to escape the severe repression of the Jim Crow laws in the South. According to Baldwin, Harlem was a "dreadful place ... a kind of concentration camp," where at the age of ten he was beaten by two police officers because of the color of his skin. It was also the place where his mother said no child would ever be safe. At the age of 24, Baldwin needed to get away from "the dehumanizing society of New York" to avoid becoming engulfed by "the fury of the color problem." He accepted a literary prize that included a monetary stipend in 1948 and went to France to write.

Apparently the escape was worthwhile. Baldwin worked at finding the individual within himself after he had a breakdown and spent some recuperative time listening to the blues music of Bessie Smith. Within the next few years he produced the critically-acclaimed *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in 1953 and the controversial *Giovanni's Room* in 1956. Although one of the reasons Baldwin had escaped to Europe was to avoid being categorized as a "Negro writer," events occurring at this time in the United States made him think the time had come to accept the label. He saw the U.S. Supreme Court rule that segregation was illegal in the case of *Brown vs. The Board of Education* in 1954, and he also saw Rosa Parks arrested for not moving to the back of a bus a year after that. Then in 1957, he heard of the race riot in Arkansas that occurred after nine black students began attending an all-white school. As a member of an ethnic and cultural community that was experiencing rapid change, Baldwin felt obligated to return to the United States.

Baldwin published "Sonny's Blues" the year he returned. The story contains evidence of the conflict Baldwin faced: between following an individual path and maintaining or renewing ethnic ties. According to John Reilly in *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, "the discovery of identity is nowhere presented more successfully than in the short story of 'Sonny's Blues'." The story concerns two estranged brothers and their quest to find fulfillment. Their relationship undergoes change as they tentatively reach an understanding and begin to talk with one another again.

"Sonny's Blues" powerfully shows the growth of Sonny's older brother, the narrator, who had responded to his racial status by fitting in with the status quo. The narrator is an algebra teacher in a New York high school. His success in assimilating into the white-dominated society separates him from his brother and a world that "filled everything, the people, the houses, the music, the dark, quicksilver barmaid, with the menace [that] was their reality."

On the other hand, his younger brother Sonny lives outside of the accepted white society. Sonny is initially portrayed as the family failure, the kind of character that Baldwin so easily criticized in his early essay "The Protest Novel." Rather than fulfilling himself by assimilating into the mainstream culture and following the American Dream, he chooses to immerse himself in the blues world and become a heroin addict. It is within

this portrayal of how individuals react to and deal with their circumstances that we see Baldwin looking both at individual importance and ethnic renewal.

Baldwin weaves images and concepts from his past into the story. He writes of a neighborhood quite reminiscent of his own. The students in the story are "smothering in these houses, [coming] down into the streets for light and air and [finding] themselves encircled by danger." The brothers' parents consider their environment unsafe, but then too the father says, "Ain't no place safe for kids, nor anybody." Like Sonny, he also uses the blues—an African-American folk music genre that originated in the South—as a key metaphor. (Metaphors are devices used in writing to show how something totally unlike something else may in fact share similar characteristics.) In "Sonny's Blues," the blues become the instrument that, as one critic says, helps rebuild relationships, either of the self or with others. The relationship being repaired belongs to Sonny and the narrator. In Baldwin's own life the blues were his mainstay during his breakdown. The music helped connect him to who he was. Thus, Baldwin uses the blues in this story to show us an individual's road to fulfillment. As Howe says, however, it is also used to depict the "living culture of men and women ... who share in the emotion and desires of common humanity ... as evidence of [Black] worth ... moral tenacity, and right to self-acceptance." The music becomes, therefore, a device to explain individual fulfillment and extend it to identify a culture.

When Baldwin writes of the narrator's students "living as we'd been living then, ... growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities," he reminds readers of the realities for American blacks in the 1950s. When he describes in detail the revival scene on the sidewalk, he demonstrates a tradition with value in that same community. At the end of the story, when both brothers are in the nightclub and Creole steps aside to let Sonny solo, the narrator overcomes his isolationist position and feels a sense of empathy and community with his brother. He allows himself re-entrance into his culture while he listens to what Sonny plays: "He began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and 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."

Source: Jennifer Hicks, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

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Essays and Criticism: Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues": The Scapegoat Metaphor

In James Baldwin's only book of short stories, *Going to Meet the Man*, "Sonny's Blues" stands out as the best, most memorable. This story is both realistic and symbolic, part autobiography and part fiction. So memorable is "Sonny's Blues" that a student once put it at the top of a list of thirty stories read for a course in fiction. She commented, "The story haunts you; its beauty continues in your mind long after the original reading and discussion." The story's haunting beauty comes from our participation in the scapegoat metaphor that creates the intricate tracery which holds the story together, forming a graceful spiral, a pattern of correspondences which informs and entices as it helps us to be free.

The scapegoat metaphor is developed through several images, the most important of which is music, with its links to suffering and brotherhood. But we are only dimly aware of this scapegoat pattern until we see the final, startling biblical image of the scotch and milk drink, "the very cup of trembling," which follows Sonny's playing of the blues and which clarifies the story's meaning. This "cup of trembling," then, is at once the Old Testament cup of justice and the New Testament cup of Gethsemane, or mercy. The Old Testament allusion to the "cup of trembling" leads directly to the scapegoat metaphor and the idea of pain and suffering of a people.

The New Testament story of hope is carried in Sonny's name which suggests Christ symbolism and leads to the New Testament message of the "cup of trembling" as the cup of Gethsemane which Christ drank, symbolizing the removal of sins for all who believe and hope for eternal life through belief in him. Sonny's name echoes this special relationship. Sonny, the scapegoat, is the hope of his particular world.

The power of guilt and suffering is revealed in Sonny's tenuous relationship with his own brother and in his immediate empathy with the revivalists; it has been foreshadowed in the anguish of the young friend who still feels a connection with Sonny. Through these people's responses we come to understand that brothers—literal or metaphorical—rescue, redeem, bring righteous anger, and act as scapegoats to open up the world of suffering; the friend begins this for Sonny's brother, the revivalists for Sonny, and Sonny for his brother and for us.

Further, the scapegoat metaphor is strengthened and enriched by the metaphor of shared suffering carried through music—either by a young boy's whistle, by the revivalist's hymns, or finally and most significantly by Sonny's hot piano on which he plays the blues. The blues metaphor also involves suffering and the sharing of suffering that supercedes race and time and cements us all together within our shared humanity. Sonny's music—the blues—has power to transform both his and our pain; through his sharing, Sonny becomes the ultimate scapegoat.

The term "scapegoat" means "sharing of pain"; it implies a true understanding of another's suffering. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, the scapegoat, the caper emissarius, or azazel, was originally "a goat over the heads of which the high priest of the ancient Jews confessed the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement, after which it was allowed to escape." More secularly and popularly, the scapegoat is "a person, group, or thing upon whom the blame for the mistakes or crimes of others is thrust."

Baldwin, himself, defines for us the scapegoat metaphor when he asserts "That all mankind is united by virtue of their humanity." He writes elsewhere, "It is a terrible, an inexorable, law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own: in the face of one's victim, one sees oneself." In another context, Jack Matthews, in *Archetypal Themes in the Modern Story*, asks "When is a person not himself?" He answers, "When he reminds you of someone else and you can't see the living presence because of the remembered image. Or when, through accident or muddled design, he begins to embody our own secret fears. In psychology, this is termed projection; in a story or folktale, it is a celebration of the Scapegoat theme." Thus the literary scapegoat, through his own personal suffering or by his metaphorical sharing of his own sorrow, may allow us to see into life and into ourselves and thus vicariously transfer our guilt and pain through him and his suffering.

In this story music is the thread that accompanies and develops the brotherhood/scapegoat metaphor. For in his music Sonny reveals both his suffering and his understanding of others' pain. His music becomes a mystical, spiritual medium, an open-ended metaphor simultaneously comforting the player and the listener and releasing their guilt and pain. No words could have expressed so well what Sonny's music conveyed effortlessly. For, according to Cirlot [in *A Dictionary of Symbols*], "Music represents an intermediate zone between the differentiated or material world and the undifferentiated realm of the 'pure will' of [German philosopher Arthur] Schopenhauer." The power of this emotional transfer is seen in the brother's response. For through Sonny's music his brother comes to understand his own life, his parents' experience, his daughter's death, and his wife's grief. The brother recapitulates his own, Sonny's, and the family's suffering here at the end of the story. But as [Danish philosopher Soren] Kierkegaard says, in *Repetition*, "*Repetition*" replaces "the more traditional Platonic term anamnesis or recollection." This is "not the simple repeating of an experience, but the recreating of it which redeems or awakens it to life, the end of the process ... being the apocalyptic promise: 'Behold, I make all things new.'" Sonny's awakening is done through his blues, and its effect is revealed through the brother's sudden understanding, conveyed in the final image of the Scotch and milk drink, "the very cup of trembling." This central biblical image reverberates with life and reinforces the

scapegoat metaphor. This recreation of life is also what the blues are all about. We come full circle.

The scapegoat metaphor is first presented very quietly when Sonny's childhood friend offers to become a scapegoat, insisting upon his symbolic action when he tells Sonny's brother, "Funny thing, ... when I saw the papers this morning, the first thing I asked myself was if I had anything to do with [Sonny's arrest for using and selling heroin]. I felt sort of responsible." The young man offers to take the blame for Sonny's fall, but his hesitant plea is offensive to the brother who, like us, does not understand the symbolic significance of the act. For, instead of accepting and sharing the man's guilt, the brother becomes angry at the friend's panhandling. He feels superior to him and rejects his offer and his sympathy.

Just prior to this meeting with the old friend a boy's whistle echoes through the school yard. The whistle is "at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds." But this music creates a central abstract image, a tone poem carrying the sadness and guilt of the brother, a simple yet complicated sounding of pain.

This first subtle pairing of music with guilt and pain sets the tone for the story. This young man, this emotional "brother," cannot comfort Sonny's brother, but paradoxically his sincere concern increases the brother's understanding of Sonny's problems. Further, this sad young man illustrates the community's desperate need for a savior as well as setting up the scapegoat metaphor. For the brother sees in the friend as in a mirror the great sadness and courage of Sonny. He says, "All at once something inside gave and threatened to come pouring out of me. I didn't hate him [the friend] any more. I felt that in another moment I'd start crying like a child." This emotional release is the first step toward understanding and the first presentation of the Old Testament scapegoat motif so delicately interwoven in this story.

The scapegoat metaphor is next presented and perfectly symbolized by the street revival. The street people are a paradigm of life, a kind of representative cross-section of humanity. All sorts of people watch and listen to the street revivalists—working people, children, older folks, street women, Sonny, and Sonny's brother who watches from above at the window. At this "old fashioned revival meeting" there are "three sisters in black, and a brother. All they [have are] their voices and their Bibles and a tambourine." These people sing "'Tis the old ship of Zion' ... it has rescued many a thousand!" The listeners hear nothing new, only the old pain and suffering and the offer of relief from three sisters and a brother, mortals like themselves; yet these four make suffering real. Their music acts as a mirror for the watchers whose response illustrates the scapegoat metaphor in action: "As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last." These spirituals are an amalgam of joy and the blues, touching everyone who listens and helping them share the guilt and pain of the human condition.

The revival, central to the brother's awareness since it incorporates music, religion, and suffering, helps Sonny to articulate the relationship between suffering and human understanding. Also, for Sonny, the woman revivalist serves as a scapegoat; she helps him to understand his own suffering just as she had helped those who listened and contributed to her cause. For Sonny, this insight into the woman's suffering makes his own pain bearable, makes it possible to reach out to his brother. For Sonny understands this scene. Touched by their pain, he alone articulates its universal meaning—suffering. New Testament echoes of brother and savior are palpable in his response: "It's repulsive to think you have to suffer that much." But ironically, the biblical scapegoat metaphor suggests group suffering as well as individual suffering.

Sonny's own pain has been personal and private. He had tried to tell his brother about his suffering in the letter from prison, but he was almost inarticulate. His suffering went beyond words. Now, after the brothers have experienced the revival, Sonny tries again to communicate with his brother by explaining his relationship with

music: "you finally try to get with it and play it, [and] you realize nobody's listening. So you've got to listen. You got to find a way to listen," to distance the pain, to look at despair and deal with guilt in order to live. To play this way requires brutal honesty and empathy with the suffering of others. Sonny says, I "can't forget—where I've been. I don't mean just the physical place I've been, I mean where I've been. And what I've been ... I've been something I didn't recognize, didn't know I could be. Didn't know anybody could be." But the painful rendition of the revivalists shows him musically that others have been there too.

Significantly, Sonny invites his brother to hear him play right after the street revival when they talk for almost the first time. Sonny understands his own need and his brother's suffering because someone else's suffering mirrors his own, effectively causing his confession and his sharing of his own pain through his music, mirror of man's soul. Music is able to heal wounds, for when Sonny is in perfect harmony with himself and with his environment, when he understands, he plays the piano effortlessly. Now Sonny's confession of failure also prepares for the final scene where Sonny plays the blues, an appropriate musical form based on folk music and characterized by minor harmonies, slow tempo, and melancholy words. The blues, like the tuneless whistle and the melancholy spirituals sung by the revivalists, reinforce the idea of human suffering carried by the scapegoat metaphor. For the blues, sad and melancholy jazz, are a mood, a feeling, a means of escape and entertainment; the blues, especially, are a way of sharing suffering, a way of strengthening the idea of community. The blues, the tune without the words in this instance, help the inarticulate young pianist to communicate with his brother and with the world. Thus he enriches the central metaphor for the story. For according to C. W. Sylvander, "Art can be a means for release from the 'previous condition' when it is heard, listened to, understood."

The linkage between the scapegoat motif and the music is clearly revealed when Creole has the group play the blues and signifies that this particular rendition is "Sonny's blues." L. H. Pratt notes that "Once the narrator draws near to listen, the blues becomes the means by which Sonny is able to lead his brother, through a confrontation with the meaning of life, into a discovery of self." Through the blues the brothers can communicate. The blues become the last and greatest reinforcer of the scapegoat metaphor. For through the music something magical happens.

The narrator comes to understand that "not many people ever hear [music]. [But] when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations." The same thing is true of our suffering and our alienation from others. Until we understand another's pain, we cannot understand our own. We must be transformed as the musician is. The musician, a kind of scapegoat, removes the pain of existence and helps us understand our suffering.

Sonny—the name echoes his strong New Testament scapegoat position—takes the pain away for all those who listen when he plays the blues. But as Baldwin says, Sonny cannot be free unless we listen and we will not be free either until he removes our pain—or until we believe in his ability to remove that suffering; Sonny thus serves to free those who listen as the cup of Gethsemane serves to free those who believe. Sonny's name echoes this special relationship and speaks of him as the ultimate scapegoat.

The brother, then, represents us also as he vividly illustrates our human response to the scapegoat offer. We accept, as understanding and insight come through the music; we change, for the function of the scapegoat is vicarious death. The ancient scapegoat was presented alive and allowed to escape; but metaphorically he represented the death of sin and pain for those covered by his action. Metaphysically what happens when we hear, as Sonny knows, is a death of our old understanding or the old ways and a recreation of a new way of being. So finally, at the end, in the image of the Scotch and milk drink, an image so unprepared for as to be startling, we see Sonny's symbolic value as the scapegoat. The transformation occurs as the music plays, because for the musician "What is evoked ... is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours."

Only in music can Sonny truly tell all and fulfill his function as a scapegoat. Only in music can he reach our hearts and minds. Thus the last and clearest presentation of the scapegoat metaphor comes at the end of the story. Here "Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others ... It was no longer a lament." This is a clear expression of the scapegoat metaphor. For Sonny's sharing through music transforms the pain. As the narrator says, "Freedom lurked around us and I understood at last that he could help us be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did." This freedom is the Black's escape, the reader's escape, Sonny's escape. It is the scapegoat metaphor in action, a release for Sonny's brother and for us too. For Sonny "was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever."

The reversal of the situation at the end is important. The blues which Creole guides Sonny to play are central. For to play the blues one must first have suffered; then one creates the form to hold the pain, a fluid changing style where, according to John Reilly, "One uses the skill one has achieved by practice and experience in order to reach toward others." The narrator expresses it best: "For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness."

Sonny's brother indicates that he both understands and symbolically shares Sonny's pain and guilt by sending the Scotch and milk drink. He affirms the religious connection with his comment, "For me, then, as they began to play again [the cup of Scotch and milk] glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling." The drink of Scotch and milk develops the image of Sonny as sinner and savior, the God/man, the scapegoat, the unlikely mixture which saves. This image conveys Sonny's complex purpose and suggests, on an earthly level, that Sonny's pain will continue, but his pain is shared and understood by his brother. On the second level it suggests that as God took away the pain for Israel, and as Christ takes away the pain and sin of the world for the believer, so does Sonny, the scapegoat, take away pain and guilt for his brother, for the listeners, and for us. As Keith Byerman said [in *Studies in Short Fiction*], "The drink itself, Scotch and milk, is an emblem of simultaneous destruction and nurture to the system; it cannot be reduced to one or the other. Sonny's acceptance of it indicates that his life will continue on the edge between the poison of his addiction and the nourishment of his music." But Sonny has drunk the cup of pain before; now the brother joins in, empathizes, understands. Sonny drinks the Scotch and milk and continues to suffer, but part of his suffering is removed by his brother's understanding. For the brother, the action itself suggests increased understanding and a sharing of Sonny's pain.

The brother's final comment about the "cup of trembling" emphasizes the narrator's understanding and reinterprets the image, making Sonny a true scapegoat for the reader and enlarging our vision as well. Only with the last image do we reflect on the biblical imagery, seeing Sonny's linkage to Aaron and to Christ. Then we concentrate on Sonny's name; he is transformed before our very eyes and we see in his ceremonial acceptance of the drink his function as a scapegoat, a substitute for all.

Source: Patricia R. Robertson, "Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': The Scapegoat Metaphor," in *The University of Mississippi Studies in English*, Vol IX, 1991, pp. 189-96.

Sonny's Blues Baldwin, James: Introduction

"Sonny's Blues" James Baldwin

The following entry presents criticism on Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" (1957). See also James Baldwin Criticism (Volume 1), and Volumes 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 15, 17, 127.

The short story "Sonny's Blues" is Baldwin's most highly acclaimed treatment of his signature themes: the nature of identity, race relations in the United States, human suffering, and the function of art. Set in the early 1950s in New York City, the story is narrated by an unnamed man who relates his attempts to come to terms with his long estranged brother, Sonny, a jazz musician. John M. Reilly, noting that an "outstanding quality of the Black literary tradition in America is its attention to the interdependence of personal and social experience," has concluded that "Sonny's Blues" both depicts and manifests the belief that the "artful expression of personal yet typical experience is one way to freedom."

Plot and Major Characters

After reading in a newspaper of Sonny's arrest for the possession and sale of heroin, the narrator—a high school algebra teacher aspiring to middle-class values, tastes, and security—recoils from the idea of getting involved in his brother's life. As he ponders the meaning of Sonny's situation and of his own fraternal obligations, the narrator recalls scenes and impressions from his childhood. He remembers in particular the story his mother told him about the murder of his uncle, a blues musician, the effect this had on his father, and his mother's subsequent entreaty to the narrator to always look after Sonny. After his relatively brief time in jail, Sonny comes to live with the narrator and his wife. The awkward, tentative conversations that ensue result in Sonny inviting his brother to hear him play at a Greenwich Village bar. Accepting the offer as an attempt at reconciliation, the narrator experiences—through the nuances of the music and the subtle interplay of the musicians—a sublime understanding of his brother and of the importance of music as a release from existential suffering.

Major Themes

Like much of Baldwin's writing, fiction as well as nonfiction, "Sonny's Blues" addresses specific racial issues and themes regarding the human condition. Displaying the influence of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, whose works were largely responsible for articulating the philosophy of Existentialism, Baldwin depicts a world in which suffering characterizes man's basic state. The story's principal characters, however, not only struggle through an absurd world devoid of inherent meaning, but must also persevere in a society that tolerates racism. Baldwin thus sees black Americans suffering doubly: from the existential angst of the human condition, and from the humiliation, poverty, and violence imposed on them by a prejudiced society. In "Sonny's Blues" Baldwin addresses these issues by employing metaphors of darkness and anxiety, incorporating images of confinement, and offering portraits of life in contemporary Harlem and, through the narrator's recollection of his childhood and family, the American South. Another of the story's major themes concerns music, specifically jazz and blues. Baldwin uses these forms, which are African American in origin, for various purposes. Music is associated with particular eras and places—blues with the South's past and jazz, specifically bebop, with the modern urban setting. Also, Baldwin characterizes the narrator, in part, by his lack of musical knowledge; critics note that the emotional distance between the brothers is symbolized by the narrator's unfamiliarity with bebop and his ignorance of the great saxophone player Charlie "Bird" Parker. Moreover, commentators note that the narrator's epiphanic experience at the end of the story, when he hears Sonny's playing, instantiates the theme of the redemptive powers of music and signals the rebirth of the brothers' relationship.

Critical Reception

"Sonny's Blues" is generally considered one of Baldwin's finest works. Many commentators have discussed the story in relation to the author's role as a civil-rights leader. John M. Reilly has noted that "Sonny's Blues" "states dramatically the motive for Baldwin's famous polemics in the cause of Black freedom." A minority of critics have commented negatively that the social and political messages in "Sonny's Blues" are presented in a heavy-handed manner. Joseph Featherstone, for example, remarked that at various points in the story one hears "not the voice of Sonny or his brother, [but] the intrusive voice of Baldwin the boy preacher." Most

critics, however, agree with John Rees Moore, who stated that "Sonny's Blues" is "unequivocally successful."

Sonny's Blues Baldwin, James: Principal Works

Autobiographical Notes (autobiography) 1953
Go Tell It on the Mountain (novel) 1953
The Amen Corner (drama) 1955
Notes of a Native Son (essays) 1955
Giovanni's Room (novel) 1956
Giovanni's Room (drama) 1957
"Sonny's Blues" (short story) 1957; published in the journal *Partisan Review*
Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son (essays) 1961
Another Country (novel) 1962
The Fire Next Time (essays) 1963
Blues for Mister Charlie (drama) 1964
†*Going to Meet the Man* (short stories) 1965
This Morning, This Evening, So Soon (novella) 1967
Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (novel) 1968
A Rap on Race [with Margaret Mead] (conversations) 1971
No Name in the Street (essays) 1972
One Day, When I Was Lost: A Scenario Based on "The Autobiography of Malcolm X"
[adaptor; from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley] (drama) 1972
A Dialogue [with Nikki Giovanni] (dialogue) 1973
A Deed from the King of Spain (drama) 1974
If Beale Street Could Talk (novel) 1974
The Devil Finds Work (essays) 1976
Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood [with Yorán Cazac] (juvenilia) 1976
Just above My Head (novel) 1979
Jimmy's Blues: Selected Poems (poetry) 1983
The Evidence of Things Not Seen (nonfiction) 1985
The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985 (nonfiction) 1985
Harlem Quartet (novel) 1987

s is an adaptation of the novel.

†This collection includes "Sonny's Blues."

Criticism: Elaine R. Ognibene (essay date January 1971)

SOURCE: "Black Literature Revisited: 'Sonny's Blues,'" in *English Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 1, January, 1971, pp. 36-7.

[In the essay below, Ognibene examines the main themes in "Sonny's Blues."]

Barbara Dodds Stanford (*English Journal*, March 1969) calls black literature "a godsend to the teacher who wants his class to deal with genuine communication problems...." Citing among others, two Baldwin classics: *Notes of a Native Son* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, she mentions that in such works "it is a relief to recognize our own struggle to find ourselves," and she further intimates that students can relate to "young people struggling to assert their own independence and identity...." A work which she fails to list, a story which is often lost among Baldwin's writings, is "Sonny's Blues." This work is particularly relevant, not only

because it concerns itself with problems facing many in this era of disintegrating family bonds and uncertain norms, but also because it affords an opportunity to elicit the type of "affective" response which Mrs. Stanford justly considers important. In it Baldwin deals with the question of prejudice and stereotypes; with an attempt to bridge a modern cliché—the generation gap; with an ascent from drugs to something more real and more lasting; and with a search for self-identity that is every man's. [Presented with] such pertinent content, one needs to take a more careful look.

Close perusal of "Sonny's Blues" reveals that while it is ostensibly about Sonny—his descent to the underworld through drugs and his resurrection through jazz—Baldwin's deeper concern is with the narrator, the respectable schoolteacher, the "white" Negro, Sonny's big brother. The author shows that the nameless "I" of his story, though older, is not wiser, and he uses both Sonny and his music as tools to help the narrator reconcile himself to his racial heritage.

Reading the newspaper account about his brother, the narrator says that he is "scared" for Sonny, but his next words belie his statement. "I couldn't believe it. . . . I couldn't find any room for it anywhere inside me." It is not Sonny but he himself he fears for, for, if he reestablishes contact with Sonny, he is faced with a condition of dissonance: his carefully ordered middle class existence cannot acknowledge a drug addict brother, yet somehow he feels vaguely "responsible." Baldwin mentions that this deliberation was carrying the narrator "someplace he didn't want to go," and he intimates that the "someplace" is a past which Sonny's brother has rejected and tried to escape by leaving Harlem and accepting the bourgeois values of the white community. But when Sonny returns and they ride together through the park, the past that the narrator has exiled to the periphery of his consciousness intrudes upon him in the person of the young boys that he sees playing, and he finds himself "seeking . . . that part of himself which had been left behind."

Returning to the house, he again senses the impending danger that self knowledge brings, and Baldwin has him reiterate his avowed purpose: "I was trying to find something out about my brother." What the author leaves unsaid is that he is also searching for a lost part of himself. When Sonny's brother loses himself in reminiscence, Baldwin, in a classic dialog of non-communication, reveals the true relationship that exists between the brothers.

Upon being questioned, Sonny admits that he wants to be a musician, but the narrator feels that it's not right for his brother; he feels that it is beneath him, perhaps because it is too close to the white stereotype of the Rhythm 'n Blues Blackman. He dismisses Sonny's ambition as a stage that "kids go through," and when things don't go exactly his way he gives up. But Sonny, although young, is mature enough to realize that "things take time," and he sees the distinction between a job done for money and a chosen vocation. He can make a living elsewhere, but being a musician is "the only thing" he wants to do. And when his brother pleads for him to "be reasonable," Baldwin hints that what he really means is: See things my way or not at all. Sonny justly accuses him, "I hear you. But you never hear anything I say," and his accusation holds, for the narrator, in closing himself to the sights and sounds of the ghetto, has even deafened himself to his brother's voice.

When Sonny returns from the army, his brother yet is "unwilling to see that he is a man," and, still clinging to his middle class standards, he treats Sonny's music as only "an excuse for the life he led." It is not until his own personal suffering that he can begin to understand his brother's anguish or experience. Baldwin uses suffering as a bond and as an impetus to communication. He has the narrator make his first honest attempt to listen when Sonny explains his use of drugs: "Something inside me told me that I should hold my tongue." The author shows that at last he is beginning to realize the proportions of the barrier that he has erected: "I had held silence—so long!—when he had needed human speech to help him." But he is still struggling; he finds it difficult to accept even suffering that is not done on his own terms. "You're just hung up on the way some people try—it's not *your* way!" Sonny calls his bluff as he had done as a teenager, and his brother reluctantly agrees to meet him on his own ground.

At the nightclub, in Sonny's world, the narrator states that the music "hit something in me." It evokes an image of his collective past, and he sees that the tale of a people's joys and sorrows "must always be heard," for "it's the only light we've got in all this darkness." If he rejects the past of his race, there is nothing to sustain him. He hears Sonny's blues and senses that freedom that comes in acknowledging one's origins: "I understood ... he could help us be free if we would listen." He does listen and the music evokes memories; it gives him back a personal history that no longer needs to be repressed, a history that now could "live forever."

Though he is realistic enough to see it as "only a moment," though the world outside is still threatening, nevertheless, the music has penetrated his cultural deafness. Through contact with Sonny and his music Baldwin has brought the narrator to a gradual enlightenment and shown that in accepting Sonny's blues he has made them, in part at least, his own.

Criticism: Sherley Anne Williams (essay date 1972)

SOURCE: "The Black Musician: The Black Hero as Light Bearer," in *Give Birth to Brightness*, Dial Press, 1972, pp. 135-66.

[*Williams is an American novelist, poet, critic, and author of children's books whose most highly acclaimed work is the novel Dessa Rose (1986). In the following excerpt, a portion of which appeared in CLC-3, she examines the significance of music and the musician in "Sonny's Blues."*]

The musician in the works of James Baldwin is more than a metaphor; he is the embodiment of alienation and estrangement, which the figure of the artist becomes in much of twentieth century literature. Most of his characters have at the center of their portrayal an isolation from the society, the culture, even each other. They are also commentaries upon the brutal, emasculating, feared—and fearing—land from which they are so estranged. The musician is also for Baldwin an archetypal figure whose referent is Black lives, Black experiences and Black deaths. He is the hope of making it in America and the bitter mockery of never making it well enough to escape the danger of being Black, the living symbol of alienation from the past and hence from self and the rhythmical link with the mysterious ancestral past. That past and its pain and the transcendence of pain is always an implicit part of the musician's characterization in Baldwin. Music is the medium through which the musician achieves enough understanding and strength to deal with the past and present hurt.

The short story, "Sonny's Blues," sketches this kind of relationship between the individual and his personal and group history. Sonny is a jazz pianist who has recently returned from a drug cure. The story is set in New York, Harlem, and seems at first glance merely another well-written story about a young Black man trying to become himself, to attain his majority and retain his humanity amid all the traps which have been set to prevent just that. But the simplicity of the tale is only surface deep; in a rising crescendo of thematic complexity, the present struggle is refracted through the age-old pain, the age-old life force. The story is narrated by Sonny's older brother who has found it difficult to understand what music means to Sonny. Sonny's desire to be a jazz musician, which his brother associates with the "good-time" life, has created a schism between himself and his more orthodox brother. And because the brother cannot understand what lies between himself and Sonny, he cannot forgive Sonny for Sonny's own pain, which he, for all his seniority, is powerless to ease, or for the pain which their ruptured relationship has caused him. The closing pages of the story are a description of the brother's reaction as he listens to Sonny play for the first time.

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and 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. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours. I just watched Sonny's face. His face was troubled, he was working hard, but he wasn't with it.

The attempt to once again make it through music brings no instant transformation. Sonny is approaching the center of his life and he cannot know what he will find there. But he understands that if he is to live, he must deal with that dread, that terror, chance the terrifying in order to triumph.

And I had the feeling that, in a way, everyone on the bandstand was waiting for him, both waiting for him and pushing him along. But as I began to watch Creole, I realized that it was Creole who held them all back. He had them on a short rein. Up there, keeping the beat with his whole body, wailing on the fiddle, with his eyes half closed, he was listening to everything, but he was listening to Sonny. He was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing—he had been there, and he knew. And he wanted Sonny to know. He was waiting for Sonny to do the things on the keys which would let Creole know that Sonny was in the water.

The musical group, Ellison's "marvel of social organization" [Ralph Ellison, "Living with Music"], is the catalyst which makes it possible for Sonny to begin to see himself through the music, to play out his own pain through the expression of it.

And Sonny hadn't been near a piano for over a year. And he wasn't on much better terms with his life, not the life that stretched before him now.... And the face I saw on Sonny I'd never seen before. Everything had been burned out of it, and, at the same time, things usually hidden were being burned in, by the fire and fury of the battle which was occurring in him up there.

Yet, watching Creole's face as they neared the end of the first set, I had the feeling that something had happened, something I hadn't heard.... Creole started into something else, it was almost sardonic, it was *Am I Blue*. And, as though he commanded, Sonny began to play. Something began to happen. And Creole let out the reins. The dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums. Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted, sweet and high, slightly detached perhaps, and Creole listened, commenting now and then, dry, and driving, beautiful and calm and old. Then they all came together again, and Sonny was part of the family again. I could tell this from his face. He seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano. It seemed that he couldn't get over it. Then, for awhile, just being happy with Sonny, they seemed to be agreeing with him that brand-new pianos certainly were a gas.

Sonny's music and his life become one and he is fused with the musical group in a relationship which sustains one because it sustains all. And finally, through the music, Sonny's brother begins to understand not so much Sonny, as himself, *his* past, *his* history, *his* traditions and that part of himself which he has in common with Sonny and the long line of people who have gone before them.

Then Creole stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us

listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

And this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation. Listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen. Now these are Sonny's blues. He made the little black man on the drums know it, and the bright, brown man on the horn. Creole wasn't trying any longer to get Sonny in the water. He was wishing him Godspeed. Then he stepped back, very slowly, filling the air with the immense suggestion that Sonny speak for himself.

Then they all gathered around Sonny, and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and 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. Yet, there was no battle in his face now. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever.

It is this then, this intense, almost excruciating, but always sustaining relationship among musicians and between them and their audiences which the musician is meant to evoke. The emphasis is gradually transformed from pain to survival to life. All are linked together by invisible webs, indestructible bonds of tradition and history, and this heritage, once revealed, becomes the necessary regenerative power which makes life possible.

Criticism: Suzy Bernstein Goldman (essay date Fall 1974)

SOURCE: "James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': A Message in Music," in *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Fall, 1974, pp. 231-33.

[*In the following essay, Goldman discusses the main themes in "Sonny's Blues."*]

In "Sonny's Blues" theme, form, and image blend into perfect harmony and rise to a thundering crescendo. The story, written in 1957 but carrying a vital social message for us today, tells of two black brothers' struggle to understand one another. The older brother, a straight-laced Harlem algebra teacher, is the unnamed narrator who represents, in his anonymity, everyman's brother; the younger man is Sonny, a jazz pianist who, when the story opens, has just been arrested for peddling and using heroin. As in so much of Baldwin's fiction, chronological time is upset. Instead the subject creates its own form. In this story of a musician, four time sequences mark four movements while the leitmotifs of this symphonic lesson in communication are provided by the images of sound. Musical terms along with words like "hear" and "listen" give the title a double meaning. This story about communication between people then reaches its climax when the narrator finally hears his brother's sorrow in his music, hears, that is, Sonny's blues.

The story begins when the narrator learns of Sonny's arrest in a most impersonal manner—by reading the newspaper. Yet this rude discovery sounds the initial note in these two brothers' growing closeness. The shock

of recognition forces the narrator to confront his past refusal to accept the miserable truths around him. For too long, he admits, he had been "talking about algebra to a lot of boys who might, every one of them ... be popping off needles every time they went to the head." He completes his own first lesson in understanding and takes his first step towards Sonny when he begins to hear his own students:

I listened to the boys outside.... Their laughter struck me for perhaps the first time. It was not the joyous laughter which ... one associates with children. It was mocking and insular, its intent to denigrate. It was disenchanting, and in this, also, lay the authority of their curses. Perhaps I was listening to them because I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself.

One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds.

This last boy particularly suggests Sonny, the young man who makes himself heard and transcends the disenchantment, the darkness, with his song. Then immediately the narrator encounters another surrogate brother in Sonny's old friend who has come to the school to bring the news. Conversation between the two is guarded and hostile until the narrator, although he has never liked his brother's friend, begins to hear the boy and to feel guilty for never having heard him before, "for never having supposed that the poor bastard had a story of his own, much less a sad one." Standing together outside a bar while a juke box sounds from within, the friend confesses that he first described to Sonny the effects of heroin. Again the narrator psychologically retreats. Fearful of learning about heroin and too anxious himself to help Sonny, he timidly asks what the arrest means. The friend's reply is telling. "Listen," he shouts. "They'll let him out and then it'll just start all over again. That's what I mean." The two part after the friend, pretending to have left all his money home, plays upon the narrator's guilt and basic kindness to the tune of five dollars. Thus the first movement ends.

The second movement opens with the narrator's first letter to Sonny. Sonny's answer, equating drug addiction with prison and both with Harlem, shows his need to reach his brother. Finally the two men have begun to communicate with one another. The letters continue until Sonny's return to New York when the narrator, who has started at last "to wonder about Sonny, about the life that Sonny lived inside," takes him home. The narrator is awkward here, wanting only to hear that Sonny is safe and refusing to accept the fact that he might not be. He is still unwilling to see Sonny on Sonny's terms; like an overly anxious parent he must make Sonny conform to his own concepts of respectability.

The word "safe" is the note that takes us into the third movement, to time past when Sonny's father claimed there was "no place safe." In the flashbacks the narrator recalls events that fuse past, present, and future. Parallels are drawn between the father and Sonny, between the Harlem of one generation and the Harlem of the other. Images of darkness mingle with those of sound. For each generation, however, the tragedy is new, for the older people are reluctant to inform the young ones of the condition of the Black race. The old folks who sit in the dark quit talking, because if the child "knows too much about what's happened to *them*, he'll know too much too soon about what's going to happen to him." Thus even in the past, silence was preferable to expression.

We learn also of another pair of brothers, Sonny's father and uncle. The uncle, like Sonny, was a musician, but he got killed one night when some drunk white men ran him over in their car. The narrator's mother tells her older son this story to make him look after his brother, but her death, occurring shortly after this conversation, only shows the immeasurable gulf between the two boys. The narrator, recently married, thinks he is taking care of Sonny by forcing him to live with his wife's family, but Sonny, already on drugs though unable to admit it, could not want anything less. Their failure to communicate is at its peak. When Sonny announces his ambition "to play jazz," the appalled narrator is totally unresponsive. The most he can promise is to buy

Charlie Parker's records, although Sonny insists he doesn't care what his brother listens to. Certainly he doesn't listen to Sonny, urging him only to be respectable and stay in school:

"You only got another year.... Just try to put up with it till I come back. Will you please do that? For me?"

He didn't answer and he wouldn't look at me.

"Sonny, you hear me?"

He pulled away. "I hear you. But you never hear anything *I* say."

The narrator, though he didn't know what to say to that, reminds Sonny of the piano at his in-laws, and Sonny gives in. Later we learn of Sonny's obsession with the piano. Because he has no one to communicate with, the piano becomes his only source of expression:

As soon as he came in ..., until supertime. And, after supper, he went back to that piano and stayed there until everybody went to bed. He was at the piano all day Saturday and all day Sunday....

Isabel finally confessed that it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound. And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them—naturally.... He moved in an atmosphere which wasn't like theirs at all.... There wasn't any way to reach him....

They dimly sensed, as I sensed,... that Sonny was at that piano playing for his life.

They succeed in reaching him, however, when they discover he has not been in school but in a white girl's Greenwich Village apartment playing music. After that Sonny enlists. When he returns, a man, although the narrator "wasn't willing to see it," the brothers fight, for to the narrator Sonny's "music seemed to be merely an excuse for the life he led. It sounded just that weird and disordered."

At this point they cut off all contact.

The fourth movement begins by recapitulating and developing the first. "I read about Sonny's troubles in the spring. Little Grace died in the fall." We move through time easily now, perceiving the connection between the narrator's first letter to Sonny and his daughter's death: "My trouble made his real." He has begun, finally, to sympathize, to understand.

The last movement then begins its own theme, the new relationship between the brothers. A subtly presented but major change in this relationship occurs when they watch a street revival meeting:

The revival was being carried on by three sisters in black, and a brother. All they had were their voices and their Bibles and a tambourine....

"*Tis the old ship of Zion,*" they sang.... Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for the first time, not one of them had been rescued.... The woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings, and her black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they

addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister.

There is a greater brotherhood among people than mere kinship. Moreover, the narrator realizes that their music saves them, for it "seemed to soothe a poison out of them." The narrator's simultaneous recognition of the meaning of brotherhood and the power of music leads directly to Sonny's invitation. He asks his brother to listen, that night, to his own music. That street song is thus a prelude to the brothers' first honest talk and carries us to the finale when Sonny plays for the narrator.

Sonny now tells his brother that the woman's voice reminded him "of what heroin feels like." This equation of music and drugs, recalling the narrator's discussion with Sonny's friend outside a bar, explains why the one could be a positive alternative to the other. We better understand Sonny's desperate commitment to the piano. Sonny is "doing his best to talk," and the narrator knows that he should "listen." He realizes the profundity of Sonny's suffering now and sees also his own part in it: "There stood between us, forever, beyond the power of time or forgiveness, the fact that I had held silence—so long!—when he had needed human speech to help him."

The narrator's epiphany allows Sonny to continue, and he makes explicit now the connection between music and his own need to be heard:

There's not really a living ass to talk to,... 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 realize *nobody's* listening. So *you've* got to listen. You got to find a way to listen.

Playing his own song, Sonny finds a way to listen, though he confesses that heroin sometimes helped him release the storm. Now he wants his brother to hear the storm too.

And he finally does. When Sonny, his voice barely audible, says of heroin "It can come again," the brother replies, "All right ... so it can come again. All right." For that first true acceptance of himself, Sonny tells the narrator, "You're my brother."

The finale brings our two themes of interpersonal communication and music together. Baldwin arranges a discussion between the musicians and their instruments using the language of ordinary conversation. Creole, the leader of the group, is guiding Sonny as they begin to play. "He was listening to Sonny. He was having a dialogue with Sonny." Then they work towards the climax:

The dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums, Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted,... and Creole listened, commenting now and then.... Then they all came together again, and Sonny was part of the family again....

Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about.... He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

Finally Creole steps back to let Sonny speak for himself:

Listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen. Now these are Sonny's blues....

Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life.... Sonny ... really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song.... 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.

Sonny's music stirs special memories in the brothers' lives, but these blues belong to all of us, for they symbolize the darkness which surrounds all those who fail to listen to and remain unheard by their fellow men.

Criticism: Sigmund Ro (essay date 1975)

SOURCE: "The Black Musician as Literary Hero: Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues' and Kelley's 'Cry for Me'," in *American Studies in Scandinavia*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1975, pp. 17-48.

[In the following excerpt, Ro discusses the intellectual and philosophical influences on Baldwin at the time he wrote "Sonny's Blues," examining in particular the ways in which the story reflects the existential philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Ro also situates this and other examples of Baldwin's work in the larger context of African-American literature in the pre- and post-Civil Rights eras, suggesting that Baldwin's strategy for writing about the human condition by emphasizing, or universalizing, his characters' existential predicaments was rejected by later generations of black writers.]

This essay presents two case studies of the intellectual and ideological sources of the black hero in Afro-American fiction. The two stories by James Baldwin and William Melvin Kelley ['Sonny's Blues' and 'Cry for Me'] have been selected because they are representative of their times and provide convenient mirrors of intellectual and ideological continuities and discontinuities in black American writing in the post-war era.

Art and culture intersect. To look at fictional heroes is at the same time to be looking at refracted images of cultural realities beyond the internal verbal structures of the literary artifact. In the words of Edmund Fuller, 'every man's novel may not have a *thesis*, but it must have a *premise*—whether declared or tacit, whether conscious or unconscious [*Man in Modern Fiction*, 1958]. That premise, without which no work of literature can be coherent or even intelligible, must ultimately be located in the extra-literary and extra-linguistic reality of the writer's culture. Character is perhaps the formal component most immediately dependent on such non-literary premises.

Black fiction in the post-war period illustrates this interdependence between society and art with particular clarity. In the first decade, the spirit of the black intellectual community was characterized by integrationist views and a wish to join the mainstream of American literary life. This tendency was exemplified by the use of white characters, milieus, and authorial postures in Ann Petry's and Willard Motley's fiction, and further buttressed by an emerging black critical establishment in the 1940's and '50's, trained in Northern graduate schools and rigorously applying the literary standards of white critics. Saunders Redding, Nick Aaron Ford, Nathan Scott, and Hugh Gloster were all agreed in urging black artists to emancipate themselves from 'the fetters of racial chauvinism' and to deal with universal human experience. [see Hugh M. Gloster, 'Race and the Negro Writer,' in *Black Expression*, Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., 1969; essay was originally published in 1950.]

In retrospect, it is not hard to discern the broader cultural context of this trend in black literary expression and criticism. In the overall effort of the black minority to achieve a position of equality in society, the strategy was understandably to emphasize the common humanity of black and white at the expense of the ethnocentricity and nationalism of the inter-war period. The same tendency prevailed in the Jewish-American community. In literary terms, this meant insistence on the writer's freedom to deal with his material in a non-racialist and universal spirit. Specifically, it meant literary characters created or interpreted in terms of archetypes or generalized human identity quests. In accordance with this mood, John Grimes of *Go Tell It on*

the Mountain and Ellison's unnamed hero as well as Bellow's and Malamud's Jews were read as symbols of Youth, the Artist, or the human condition.

In this light, Baldwin's best known short story, 'Sonny's Blues' (1957), merits reconsideration in terms of the modern Euro-American intellectual stance underlying it which appears to have escaped critical notice. Reflected in Baldwin's portrait of a black blues artist is, for all his discovery of racial community noted by commentators, the whole integration ethos of the first post-war decade, stated in the familiar existentialist categories of the Left Bank coteries in which Baldwin moved between 1948 and 1958. Though not actively seeking admission to the white world, Sonny is conceived in the image of Kierkegaard-Sartre-Camus and provided with an authentic black exterior. Behind Sonny there looms the non-racial esthetic of the Baldwin who proclaimed in 1955 that he merely wanted to be 'an honest man and a good writer' [*Notes of a Native Son*].

With the radicalization of the civil rights movement, the new militant nationalism, and the impact of African liberation, the literary situation for the black writer changed, spelling the end of the esthetic upon which Baldwin's Sonny was predicted. *Négritude* or *soul* gradually became a focal point of black cultural activity, involving separatist notions of artistic creation and the role of the artist.

The dimension of *Négritude* which has informed so much recent black writing is less the political implications of Pan-Africanism than the highly effective mystique of blackness as a special moral and spiritual sensibility which has evolved out of the writings of such theoreticians as Aimé Césaire, Alioune Diop, and Léopold Senghor. Here *Négritude* is thought of as a distinct ethos; that is, a body of traits, habits, and values crystallized into a peculiar life style and producing a psychology common not only to black Africans, but to blacks living in the American diaspora as well. It involves a sense of self and community which derives from an exclusive group identity forged by a unique historical experience or even, as intimated by Senghor, having its origin in biological-genetic facts. It is a condition as well as a fate, preceding and transcending the vicissitudes of economics, politics, and history. Thus, at the 1956 Conference of Negro African Writers and Artists in Paris, Senghor could appeal to American blacks to reinterpret their literature in terms of their common heritage of *Négritude*, taking himself the first step by discussing Richard Wright's poetry and *Black Boy* as African works.

In America, the corresponding concept of *soul*, if not the word itself, existed well before the historical *Négritude* movement. Although not interchangeable concepts, they share a vision of a 'Soul Force,' a unique source of moral and spiritual energy, peculiar to blacks everywhere. The real boost of the *soul* ethos and its ideologization for political and literary uses, however, occurred with the coinciding emergence of the latest phase of the civil rights movement in the U.S. and the African liberation from European colonialism in the late 1950's. The impact of *soul* was soon felt in black writing, especially as LeRoi Jones's seminal influence made itself felt after 1964, and led, in its extreme form, to a de-emphasizing of the mimetic principle of the Western conception of art and its traditional distinction between 'art' and 'life,' stressing instead the oral, utilitarian, and communal nature of African art as an ideal for black Americans to emulate....

Together, Baldwin's and Kelley's two stories provide interesting case studies of what happens to fiction when it is subjected to the pressures of ideological change.

The two stories lend themselves particularly well to a comparative analysis of the black literary hero because the external formal frameworks are so similar. The geographical settings overlap almost completely. Except for short excursions into the Bronx neighborhood of Carlyle's family [in 'Cry for Me'], both stories move within a world circumscribed, physically as well as symbolically, by Harlem and Greenwich Village. In both, Village cabarets play central roles as scenes of epiphanic illuminations in the lives of the two narrators. To each story the urban setting is indispensable either as the source of the peculiar strains and frustrations of the characters or as a foil to the unadulterated pre-urban black 'soul.' The characters operate within the same

structural pattern. In each case, the story hinges on the opposition of two characters, related by blood, but opposed in every other respect. One is a bourgeois Negro and the narrator of the story, the other is a 'soul' character with no desire to join the middle-class Establishment to which his relative belongs or to which he aspires. Sonny's brother is already firmly ensconced in the black bourgeoisie, while Carlyle appears to be bent on making it in the white world into which his family have moved since their beginnings in Harlem. In both cases, the development of the characters lends itself to description in terms of the 'initiation' pattern. Carlyle and Sonny's brother both grow from either a state of ignorance or guilty innocence to higher levels of consciousness through contact with their soulful relatives. This pattern is also the principle governing the two plots. In either case, a narrator whose presumed superiority makes him adopt the role of teacher and authority, receives a relative who is seen as ignorant, innocent, or immature. Ironically, both plots proceed to overturn this relationship by reversing their relative positions. By the end of the stories, the visitors have become the teachers and authorities by virtue of their charisma and insight while the narrators have been relegated to the position of humble apprentices and recipients of their mentors' messages. Thus the narrative structures are made to serve the educational process in the two characters initiated into the mysteries communicated by the black heroes whose medium of expression is, in both cases, music. Finally, the realism of the two stories is modified by the same set of symbols and images. Sonny and Uncle Wallace both become high priests and their concerts ceremonial occasions re-enacting semi-religious dramas of sacrifice and redemption.

This formal resemblance makes the differences in the larger implications of the two musician-heroes stand out all the more clearly. It would seem, however, from the criticism elicited by 'Sonny's Blues,' that this aspect has not been given the attention it deserves. Commentators appear unanimous in their emphasis on the racial element as it appears in the hero's individual identity quest within the boundaries of black culture. Both Marcus Klein and Shirley Anne Williams agree that the thrust of Sonny's message is the expression of his black identity. He is, in Klein's words, 'full of unspecified Negro-ness,' his problem is the 'burden of his racial identity' to be expressed through his music. Ultimately, the story undertakes to reveal 'the Negro motives that may issue in the blues' [see Marcus Klein, *After Alienation*, 1992]. Shirley Williams is willing to see Sonny as the typical alienated artist of so much twentieth-century literature, but she insists that his main 'referent is Black lives, Black experiences and Black deaths.' His estrangement is primarily an estrangement from his 'ancestral past' [see Shirley Anne Williams, *Give Birth to Brightness*, 1972]. The cure can only be effected through a restoration of the relationship between his personal history and that of his racial group. This delicate, but healing balance between private and group selves Sonny is finally able to achieve in his solo performance within the context of Creole's jazz band. On the other hand, Edward Margolies sees Sonny's music as a means of self-expression reflecting Baldwin's Christian-Protestant heritage. Even so, however, he sees Sonny's outbursts of 'the grief and terror that rage within his soul' as patterned on the testimony of the redeemed saint in the presence of witnesses, presumably to be equated with the audience, thus ultimately relating the story to the black religious tradition of the storefront church as the context of the protagonist's identity quest [see Edward Margolies, *Native Sons*, 1968].

It cannot of course be denied that Sonny's art is conditioned by racial factors. His despair is the despair of the sensitive black ghetto youngster feeling the stifling effect of his environment. His need to escape is easily attributable to fear of victimization by the same forces that turn his brother's students into drug addicts or naturally sensuous women into the frenziedly pious church sisters testifying in the street. The music has a direct therapeutic function, permitting him to contain his pent-up frustration and even enabling him to temporarily transcend his circumstances. Sonny needs his music to master his potentially self-destructive anger at being trapped in a black slum. He must play not to smash somebody's skull, his music is a form of mental hygiene. In this respect, the psychology involved is essentially the same as that of other musician- or artist-heroes in Baldwin's work or of Clay Williams in *Dutchman*.

As Sonny realizes the deeper implications of what he is playing, his music acquires the significance it has in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and in Baldwin's essays: that of putting himself and his audience in touch with their common ancestral past. In the final scene, it evokes in his brother's mind the reality of family,

forefathers, and community in black life. Memories are stirred of childhood scenes of Sunday afternoon reunions of relatives and 'church folks' huddled together against the darkness of the outside world. In an attempt to impress upon him the necessity of protecting Sonny, their mother tells him of the murder of his uncle by white men and the traumatic effect of this experience on her husband. At the piano, Sonny becomes a high priest invoking the collective and accumulated experience of 'that long line, of which we know only Mama and Daddy'—one of the central images in the first novel—and mediating with the authority of a shaman between the living and the dead members of the tribe. Throughout this ever expanding perspective from present into past, from personal experience into family history and the history of 'that long line,' this telescoped racial history, captured and re-enacted by Baldwin's musician-hero, is evoked literarily in the story in images of light and darkness. There is a consistent—and ironic—association of light with black community feeling and togetherness and of darkness with a racist and oppressive white world. Thus Sonny's music has an unmistakable racial core. It functions as a means of escape from the ghetto and as a psychological buffer to his bruised black ego by enabling him to identify with and draw strength from the past and the present group experience of his race.

This concern with his racial heritage is a prominent feature in Baldwin's other early work as well. Originally intending to escape the burden of race through a self-imposed exile, he gradually discovered the futility of such an endeavor. Cast in the form of the personal myth writers often create of their artistic coming of age, his account in 'Stranger in the Village' tells the story of how he immured himself in a Swiss village armed only with a typewriter and Bessie Smith records in order to put himself through the painful process of overcoming his feelings of shame and self-hatred through unconditional self-acceptance. Out of this experience was born his first novel. The problem of self-acceptance continued to haunt him, however, until he returned to make peace with his native land and go South in search of his ancestral roots in the late 1950's. Written in 1956–57, 'Sonny's Blues' can be directly related to the author's concern during the first post-war decade with coming to terms with the fact and meaning of being black in a racist white world which imposes upon its racial minorities its own notions of superiority and inferiority. The resulting syndromes of self-destructive flight into 'white' values and behavior patterns and the opposite impulse of revolt generated by this imposition are demonstrated by the narrator and Sonny respectively. In fact, one might view this antithetical grouping of the two main characters as a reflection of the latent tension in Baldwin's own imagination between his ambivalently alternating identifications with the black masses and the world of the black and white middle-class in a way which is strongly reminiscent of Langston Hughes's self-confessed projection of similar conflicting impulses in himself into the folk character Jesse B. Simple and the genteel, intellectual narrator in his war-time sketches in the *Chicago Defender*.

In Baldwin's story this tension is resolved in favor of Sonny's identification with his racial past and his brother's 'conversion' to a similar position, symbolized by the ritual of sharing a sacramental drink in the final scene. This racial self-acceptance is, however, a more complex matter than has hitherto been recognized. While certainly genuine and valid in racial terms, the identity achieved ultimately transcends race to become a statement on the human condition in the modern world in a universal sense. Furthermore, it can be demonstrated in considerable detail that the story's universalizing formula derives from the concepts and, occasionally, the explicit vocabulary of contemporary existentialist thought.

As already pointed out, Baldwin's story in this respect parallels the familiar pattern in post-war literature and criticism of employing racial heroes as archetypes of the modern human predicament. Characteristically, Jean-Paul Sartre's interest in Richard Wright's work is based on the supposed susceptibility of the alienated outsider-victim to interpretation in general existentialist terms. Black critic Esther Merle Jackson's essay, 'The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd' [*Phylon*, Vol. 23, 1962], rests on the assumption that there is an essential likeness between Bigger Thomas, Ellison's invisible man, and Faulkner's Joe Christmas and, on the other hand, the heroes of Dostoevsky, Proust, Gide, Malraux, Mann, and Sartre. Indeed, in the case of *Native Son* and *The Outsider*, it has become almost a critical commonplace to regard their black protagonists as symbols of suffering, alienated, rebelling mankind. In the same critical tradition, the theologian-critic Nathan

A. Scott has pointed to the kinship of Wright's writings with what he calls 'a main tradition in the spiritual history of the modern world' ['Search For Beliefs: Fiction of Richard Wright,' *University of Kansas City Review*, Vol. 23, 1966]. Scott's specific reference is to the French-inspired existentialist mode of thought, notably in Camus's version, and the grounds for the alleged sameness of the black and the existentialist experience is the analogy of the Negro's historical familiarity with anxiety, violence, rejection, nihilism, and revolt with similar phenomena in Europe as a result of the ravages of global war and totalitarian politics. The reality of the concentration camp—whether in Germany or in Mississippi—is the common ground on which the black American and the modern European meet.

Indeed, the basis for such a parallelism between the black experience and the condition of modern man was prepared by Wright himself in his threefold conception of Bigger as simultaneously a 'bad nigger,' proletarian class hero, and a symbol of uprooted modern man in an industrial and technological civilization [Richard Wright, 'How Bigger Was Born,' originally published in *Saturday Review of Literature*, Vol. 22, June 1, 1940]. This was further emphasized and elaborated in *White Man, Listen!* (1957), where he reminded his European audience that the Negro, brutally uprooted from his tribal origins in Africa and transplanted to a Western world already in the throes of the industrial revolution, epitomizes the fate of the Westerners themselves in the modern world: 'So, in historical outline, the lives of American Negroes closely resemble your own.... The history of the Negro in America is the history of America written in vivid and bloody terms; it is the history of Western Man writ small. It is the history of man who tried to adjust themselves to a world whose laws, customs, and instruments of force were leveled against them. The Negro is America's metaphor.' In his own fiction, Wright dramatized this universal perspective not only in the character of Bigger Thomas, but even more explicitly in Fred Daniels in 'The Man Who Lived Underground' (1944) and in Cross Damon.

The same tendency to see the Negro in universal and symbolic terms is present in Baldwin's work in the 1950's, prompted by the same desire after the War to play down racial differences in favor of a global vision of mankind and environmental explanations of racial characteristics. After his disappointing encounter with black Africans in Paris, he discovered the close resemblance of his own experience with that of white Americans: 'In white Americans [the American Negro] finds reflected—repeated, as it were, in a higher key—his tensions, his terror, his tenderness' [*Notes of a Native Son*]. The experience is the same as Wright's, except that, interestingly, for Baldwin it seems to be the other way round: It is the white man's condition which epitomizes his own.

Thus Baldwin and his musician-hero can be seen as placed squarely within the mainstream of both black and white racial thought in the first post-war decade. Intellectually, they are akin to the ontology and idiom constituting the framework of black writing before the racial revolution of the 1960's, reflecting the prevailing ideology of a black intelligentsia striving to de-emphasize the stigma of race through integration and universalizing formulas. Through the twist he gives to Wright's metaphor Baldwin reveals the ideological perspective of his first post-war position. Somewhat unkindly put, the implicit strategy is to plead for the Negro's equal worth by stressing that the same 'tensions,' 'terror,' and 'tenderness' that move the white man also move him. The closeness of this argument to the white liberal position is neatly revealed by comparing it to the premise of Kenneth Stampp's study of slavery from 1956: '... innately Negroes *are*, after all, only white men with black skins, nothing more, nothing less' [*The Peculiar Institution*].

It is within this larger context that Sonny yields up meanings beyond his narrowly racial significance which critics so far have tended to stress. In the effort to make him a modern man fully as human as his white brother, Baldwin turned to the concepts and vocabulary of existentialism flowing into Europe and America from the Paris in which he was living. On this background, Sonny acquires a definable 'intellectual physiognomy' and his ideological implications can be more clearly perceived. [In an endnote, Roadds that the "term is used by Georg Lukács in his essay 'The Intellectual Physiognomy of Literary Characters,' *Radical Perspectives in Art*, ed. Lee Baxandall, 1972. Originally published in 1936."] It is significant that the straining toward integrated and universalizing statements on man's existential condition has a special urgency in the

case of black heroes. In the 1950's, it was imperative to assert the universal humanity of the racial hero in order to overcome the tragic legacy of racism in Western culture.

This is not to say that Sonny is an intellectual or a simple embodiment of clear-cut ideological aims. As Georg Lukács points out, a literary character does not have to operate consciously on a high level of abstraction and verbal articulateness in order to have an intellectual physiognomy. Nor is there any need for authorial analysis and comment. Intellectual assumptions and attitudes are, and indeed should be, embedded in the whole range of responses to the pressures to which he is subjected. In Baldwin's story, instead of conceptualizing and articulating his hard-won insight verbally to his brother, Sonny prefers to expose him directly to its musical expression. Similarly, his brother's 'conversion' to Sonny's message is not presented in terms of intellectual discovery, but as a direct revelation and a ritualized initiation suggested by his symbolic non-verbal gesture of buying a sacramental 'Scotch and milk' for Sonny as a token of their communal sharing of a new wisdom. Sonny's intellectual profile and ideological significance emerge from the totality of his story, not from self-conscious philosophical contemplation or crude propaganda statements.

The existentialist concept most immediately visible in Baldwin's story is the Sartrean distinction between authentic and inauthentic living. Central to Sartre's distinction is the idea of self-delusion. Having defined man's situation as 'one of free choice, without excuse and without help,' he argues that 'any man who takes refuge behind the excuse of passion,' or by inventing some deterministic doctrine, is a self-deceiver.' The inauthentic life is that which 'seek[s] to hide from itself the wholly voluntary nature of existence and its complete freedom.' Conversely, the authentic person is he who actively wills freedom, 'that man ... whose existence precedes his essence ... who cannot, in any circumstances but will his freedom,' and who therefore cannot but will the freedom of others [see Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 1946].

The character in the story who most obviously reflects the concept of inauthenticity is Sonny's brother. His whole life is an elaborate structure of false props, based on exclusion of large hunks of reality, and erected in panicky pursuit of that bourgeois chimera: 'safety.' Incapable of facing the terror of Sonny's life, he says: 'I was dying to hear him tell me he was safe.' Constantly, he dodges reality. He does not want to believe that Sonny is being destroyed, or to know how he must feel: 'I didn't want to believe ...,' 'I certainly didn't want to know,' 'I guess it's none of my business.' Whenever the dark forces with which Sonny is involved threaten his carefully constructed illusion of safety, he panics. A fear that feels like 'a great block of ice' settles in his belly. The idea of Sonny preferring the bohemian life style of the artist to a respectable career, or jazz and the blues to classical music, arouses in him vehement reactions of fear and anger that clearly betray anxieties beyond brotherly love and solicitude. In his puritan and middle-class mind, black music is associated with intimate knowledge of the realities of existential chaos and absurdity.

Ultimately, what the narrator's anger conceals, is his guilty failure to stop deceiving himself and to heed his mother's words that 'Safe, hell! Ain't no place safe for kids, nor nobody.' It is hardly accidental that he is forever watching life through windows: subway windows, classroom windows, cab windows, and living-room windows. His is a life of non-involvement and detachment behind a fragile glass structure liable to crack or break at any moment. The only advice he is able to offer his brother is derived from the clichés he has adopted from the bourgeoisie he is aping: 'I wanted to talk about will power and how life could be—well beautiful.' In short, self-reliance and the sure reward of virtuous living. The algebra he teaches is an accurate symbol of the kind of orderly and predictable world he attempts to establish for himself. Seeking refuge in a 'safe' profession, a conventional marriage—the safety of which is ironically negated by the sudden death of his daughter—and conventional ideas, Baldwin's narrator consistently avoids facing 'the voluntary nature' of existence, thereby denying freedom not only to himself but to Sonny as well. He commits what in Sartre's terms is the ultimate sin, the very hallmark of inauthenticity: willed self deception.

On the other hand, Baldwin's black musician-hero lends himself to description in positive existentialist terms. This is not to say that Sonny is reducible to a simple set of philosophical abstractions. In the same way that his

brother's evasions are in part responses to his need to escape suffering and degradation, Sonny's acts stem from his need to break the drug habit and avoid self-destruction. Knowing the precariousness of human life in the ghetto, they are involved in real, down-to-earth problems of survival which are part of the story's fictionally established social illusion.

Within this framework of racial and social realism, however, Sonny is endowed with a peculiar charisma and insight into the nature of human existence. A clear indication that Sonny is meant to carry philosophical-ideological meaning is the repeated emphasis on the mythic dimension of his character. Isabel confesses that having Sonny in the house 'wasn't like living with a person at all.' He is not so much a flesh-and-blood human person as 'god ... a monster.' It is as though he is 'all wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision all his own.' He is beyond reach, a mystical 'presence' or force. The nightclub is his 'kingdom' where 'his veins bore royal blood.' From the beginning, his peculiar 'privacy' is insisted upon. He moves in a world all his own, a solitude in which he is supremely alone with his 'visions.' While he is performing, his fellow players are seen gathering around him on the stage as if offering up prayers to him: 'Every now and then one of them seemed to say, amen.' No doubt, Baldwin is at pains to establish Sonny as a vehicle expressing a vision of human life, a type embodying truth beyond the literal and specific problems in which he is involved. In several important respects, Sonny comes as close to Absurd Man as any American literary hero of the 1950's. Such concepts as Dread (Angst), nausea, alienation, and absurd freedom sum up his isolated stance as outsider-hero with considerable accuracy.

His disenchantment with America and its discredited Christian cosmology has begun at an early age. At 14, 'he'd been all hipped on the idea of going to India.' He is attracted to Oriental mysticism and the true spirituality of 'people sitting on rocks, naked, in all kinds of weather ... and walking barefoot through hot coals and arriving at wisdom.' The Western myths of rationalism and automatic evolutionary progress are rejected in favor of subjective quests for personal truths and static or cyclic concepts of time. In a letter he writes his brother, he states explicitly his religious apostasy: 'I wish I could be like Mama and say the Lord's will be done, but I don't know it seems to me that trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped and I don't know what good it does to blame it on the Lord.' The educational system has nothing to offer. Nothing in it corresponds with his perception of reality: 'I ain't learnt nothing in school ... Even when I go.' Eventually he drops out.

But his disillusionment goes deeper than any specific grievances he may have against society. The meaninglessness he feels at the sight of the big city jungle that surrounds him has its roots in an awareness that human existence itself is dislocated. The 'vision all his own' which he has had in his solitude is a vision of the irreconcilable divorce between man and his world. In prison, he has experienced the palpable reality of Nothingness: 'I feel like a man who's been trying to climb up out of some deep and funky hole.' He has discovered the ludicrous indecency of human suffering. Watching the revival meeting in the street, he experiences anew the nihilist's revulsion for the universe: '... listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through ... It's repulsive to think that you have to suffer that much.' He has encountered 'the roar rising from the void,' and he has felt that nauseous 'storm inside.' Playing the blues means facing it again and again as he 'leave[s] the shoreline and strike[s] out for deep water,' every time running the risk of 'drowning in it.' This experience generates in him a feeling of the unreality of reality: 'it was that they weren't real,' accompanied by a feeling of utter estrangement from it all, including his own self: 'I can't forget—where I've been. I don't mean just the physical place I've been, I mean where I've *been*. And *what* I've been ... I can't really talk about it. Not to you, not to anybody ... I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? *my stink...*'

What Sonny is haltingly, stumblingly trying to convey in words and imagery of chaos, disorder, and nothingness is ultimately Kierkegaard's 'sickness unto death,' Sartre/Roquentin's 'nausea,' and Camus/Meursault's experience of absurdity and unreality. In the final analysis, Sonny is the ego recoiling

passionately from the human condition, opposed to it by his whole consciousness and instinctual urge toward order and familiarity. It is not fear that he experiences, but Angst—that self-generating, abysmal dread when confronting *le grand néant*. He has become Absurd Man doomed to living, in Camus's phrase, 'without appeal.' He has discovered the truth about the 'wholly voluntary nature of existence,' life as total possibility, total freedom, total responsibility. Indeed, he has realized that 'existence precedes essence,' that there is no preordained human nature, that identity is created by the self through its choices and acts. In Camus's terminology, he is a 'metaphysical rebel' whose insurrection is ultimately bound to dispute 'the ends of man and creation' [see *The Rebel*, 1951]. The human condition is perceived as fundamentally unintelligible, which explains his words that it is the instinct of any man who has looked into the naked terror of an absurd universe to resort to any means to repress the truth 'in order to keep from shaking to pieces.'

It is significant that at no time does Sonny feel guilty about his absurdist vision: 'I'm not talking about it now because I feel *guilty* or anything like that—maybe it would be better if I did, I don't know.' Sonny's words here are a near-verbatim echo of Camus: '[Absurd Man] does not understand the notion of sin ... An attempt is made to get him to admit his guilt. He feels innocent. To tell the truth that is all he feels—his irreparable innocence' [*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1943]. To Sonny's brother there is something almost obscene and immoral about such a view of life. To him life is a rational and anti-tragic affair in which prudence, will power, and hard work will remove all obstacles to that 'beautiful' world of progress, success, and safety which he is chasing. According to his smug vision, Sonny's ideas are the result of his perverse pride. Therefore he attempts to impose upon Sonny a feeling of guilt by pointing out how perversely 'unreasonable' he is. For Sonny to pursue his vision is labelled as a 'sin' against Isabel's desire to live respectably, a 'sin' against himself trying to make it in society, and even a sacrilegious crime against the memory of their dead mother. These charges fall completely outside Sonny's frame of reference, however. Sonny's 'irreparable innocence' cannot conceive of any such notion of sinfulness and criminality.

It gradually dawns on the narrator that Sonny's music grows out of a valid existential experience. Being told by Isabel's relatives about the fanaticism with which Sonny practices, he realizes that the music is 'life or death' to him. His 'education' is completed in the Greenwich Village nightclub when he discovers that Sonny's 'tale' is not just his own personal story, or the story of his race's trials and tribulations, but that 'this tale ... has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation.' The blues revive memories not only of the troubles of 'that long line,' but also of the non-racial death of his little daughter from polio. Sonny's message expands into the timeless tale of human suffering, of the irrationality and sheer contingency of existence, and of the 'freedom that lurked about us.' Describing the impact of the music on the audience and on himself, he feels that it hits something in him, and he senses the growing mood of 'apprehension' as Sonny and Creole begin to 'tell us what the blues were all about.' Thus what the music does is to create in the presumably interracial audience an experience of existential anguish and a heightened awareness of life as total freedom: 'Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us be free, if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did.' For Sonny, as for Camus's metaphysical rebel, the reason for his inner freedom is the knowledge that there is no future. Like Sisyphus endlessly pushing the boulder back up to the top of the hill, he is doomed to playing the blues. His life must be a life in the present, an indefinite succession of blues acts paradoxically bestowing upon him the same modicum of freedom that Sisyphus enjoys. Sonny's freedom lies in his awareness of the nature of existence, and it is this awareness which liberates him to live to the maximum here and now. The meaning of his life is in the struggle itself. As with Sisyphus, one must imagine Sonny happy.

Defining the blues in terms close to the existentialist sensibility, Ralph Ellison states:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal disaster expressed lyrically....

Their attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self. [*Shadow and Act*, 1964]

This description fits Baldwin's Sonny to a remarkable degree. His music is nothing if not 'an autobiographical chronicle of personal disaster expressed lyrically' and thereby made representative of the lot of all men. The extent to which it is a self-transcending endeavor is suggested by the elaborate ritualization surrounding the concert from the solemnly 'ceremonious' appearance of the players on the bandstand to the subtle interaction between the soloist, the group, and the audience. The performance is metaphorically represented as a progressive movement away from the safe shoreline out into deep water, punctured only by voices whispering 'amen' as new mysteries are revealed. They all gather around Sonny as their priest-shaman, vicariously facing the void through him and his music, and partaking of the freedom he is able to wrestle from it by 'imposing order on it.' The last stage of the narrator's development, especially his final act of sharing a sacramental drink with his brother, is modelled on the pattern of baptism, Holy Communion, and initiation. The effect of this ritualization is to make Sonny's art a public act and a communal experience to be shared. In the final scene, Sonny becomes the bard and the truthsaver of all mortals. Acting as their voice and mediator, he is assigned the public function of officiating at a communal ritual of exorcism. Darkness is momentarily pushed back, the forces of destruction appeased. Riding on the waves of Sonny's artistically ordered sound, they enjoy a common triumph, however short-lived, over chaos. Ultimately, then, Baldwin's black musician has transcended both his private destiny and his role as a racial voice to become the modern existentialist Isolato speaking, [in Ellison's words from *Invisible Man*, 1952] 'on the lower frequencies,' for all human beings. Before the fact of absurdity, all racial and personal distinctions fade away, and the blues become the tragic song of all men.

This is the trans-racial Sonny the story has been straining toward all along, and the underlying ideological requirements motivating Baldwin's character portrayal have already been hinted at. That such an interpretation is not wholly arbitrary is demonstrated by a recent short story by Sam Greenlee which is an explicit rebuttal of 'Sonny's Blues' on ideological grounds.

Coming out of the new mood of blackness and celebration of racial solidarity among the post-Wright-Ellison-Baldwin generation, 'Sonny's Not Blue' [collected in *Black Short Story Anthology*, edited by Woodie King, 1972] is designed to counteract what the author sees as the spirit of 'white' individualism, integrationism, and defeatist resignation in Baldwin's story. Greenlee's Sonny is firmly anchored in the community and his actions subject to scrutiny by the group. Faced with the necessity of doing better in school, he does not, like his namesake of 15 years before, drop out, but receives the full support of his racial group who actively encourage him to improve himself so that his achievement will reflect favourably on the whole group. All the blacks in Sonny's housing project feel and act as one family. Whenever the welfare checks arrive late, the principle of group cooperation and solidarity starts operating. There are communal celebrations every time someone stops conking their hair and starts wearing a 'Fro.' They all stick together in manipulating the welfare agency. The 'white' Standard English insisted upon by the school system is rejected in favor of Black English. Healthy, unpolluted soul food is eaten. Sonny's mother is no meek praying woman scrubbing the white folks' floors, but a proud, resourceful person who takes Sonny to concerts at the Afro-Arts Theatre. The milk he drinks is 'Joe Louis milk,' and when he dreams of buying his mother a color television set, it is for the purpose of enabling her to watch the black color of Aretha Franklin's skin.

The spirit of the story is in deliberate contrast to 'Sonny's Blues.' The virtues of blackness are extolled. The social life of the group seems patterned on African-style village communism in which the individual has no life apart from the tribal family and where individual ambition finds its fulfillment within the context of the group. In contrast to the defensively struggling loner in Baldwin's story, Greenlee's black characters realize themselves through racial solidarity and collective action. His Sonny is emphatically *not* 'blue.' Reclaimed by his Afro-American tribe, he is not tainted by the spirit of resignation and decadent despair in which Baldwin's

'whitewashed' Sonny, cut off from his tribal roots, permits himself to indulge. Seen from Greenlee's ideological standpoint, Baldwin's existentialist hero is anathema to the needs of the black cause in the 1960's and '70's. Even in his most assertive moments he appears curiously defensive. His triumphs are temporary. Although he is provided with the privilege of a usable racial past and a sense of community, the value of these resources is heavily restricted. The usable part of his past is limited to the black urban experience, the Southern folk culture being dismissed by Sonny as 'that old-time, down-home crap.' For all his discovery of a racial community, he remains the solitary individual going it alone. History are recognized as resources, but they can only be of help in enduring the paralyzing feeling of absurdity which is a symptom of white decadence in the first place. From the point of view of the *engagé* black literature of recent years, Baldwin's vision is too pessimistic, individualistic, and white-oriented to be acceptable.

Thus, ironically, the very qualities which were meant to prove Sonny's universal humanity and modernity, and hence his equality with the white man, were what made him most offensive in the eyes of the next generation of black writers. What Sonny proved to Greenlee and Kelley in the 1960's was not his equality with whites in a commonly shared humanity, but his author's submission to the allegedly decadent values of a decaying Western civilization. The ideological situation confronting the black community and the black writer in the post-civil-rights era was to require an esthetic and a conception of literary character very different from those that produced Baldwin's musician-hero.

Criticism: Donald C. Murray (essay date Fall 1977)

SOURCE: "James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': Complicated and Simple," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Fall, 1977, pp. 353-57.

[In the following essay, portions of which appeared in CLC-13, Murray explores themes of identity, loss, and transcendence in "Sonny's Blues," linking them with the story's key metaphors of light, dark, and water.]

One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds.

In the world of "Sonny's Blues," the short story by James Baldwin, the author deals with man's need to find his identity in a hostile society and, in a social situation which invites fatalistic compliance, his ability to understand himself through artistic creation which is both individual and communal. "Sonny's Blues" is the story of a boy's growth to adulthood at a place, the Harlem ghetto, where it's easier to remain a "cunning child," and at a time when black is not beautiful because it's simpler to submerge oneself in middle-class conformity, the modish antics of the hipster set, or else, at the most dismal level, the limbo of drug addiction, rather than to truly find oneself. Sonny's brother, the narrator of the story, opts for the comforts of a respectable profession and his specialty, the teaching of algebra, suggests his desire for standard procedures and elegant, clear-cut solutions. On the other hand, Sonny at first trafficks with the hipster world; yet not without imposing "his own halfbeat" on "the way the Harlem hipsters walk." Eventually, however, as if no longer able to hold his own through all those other sounds of enticement and derision, Sonny is sentenced to a government institution due to his selling and using heroin.

With his brother in a penal establishment and himself a member of the educational establishment, it's fitting that the narrator would learn of Sonny's imprisonment while reading the newspaper, probably an establishment press, and while riding in a subway, an appropriate vehicle for someone who hasn't risen above his origins so far as he hopes. The subway world of roaring darkness is both the outside world of hostile forces and the inner heart of darkness which we encounter at our peril, yet encounter we must. The narrator at first cannot believe that Sonny has gone "down" ("I had kept it outside me for a long time."), but he is forced

to realize that it has happened, and, thinking of heroin, he suspects that perhaps "it did more for [Black boys like Sonny] than algebra could." Playing upon the homonym of Sonny, Baldwin writes that, for the narrator's brother, "all the light in [Sonny's] face" had gone out.

Images of light and darkness are used by Baldwin to illustrate his theme of man's painful quest for an identity. Light can represent the harsh glare of reality, the bitter conditions of ghetto existence which harden and brutalize the young. Early in the story the narrator comes upon a boy in the shadow of a doorway, a psychologically stunted creature "looking just like Sonny," "partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child." Shortly thereafter he watches a barmaid in a dingy pub and notes that, "When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore." Both figures will appear again, in other forms, during the revival meeting later in the story. At this point, however, the narrator turns away and goes on "down the steps" into the subway. He retreats from the light, however dim.

Another kind of light is that of the movie theater, the light which casts celluloid illusions on the screen. It is this light, shrouded in darkness, which allows the ghetto-dwellers' temporary relief from their condition. "All they really knew were two darknesses," Baldwin writes, "the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness." This image of the movie theater neatly represents the state of people who are at once together and alone, seated side-by-side yet without communication. Baldwin deftly fuses the theater and subway images: "They were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities." The realities are far different from the idealistic dreams of the cinema; as outside the subway window, so behind the cinema screen there is nothing but roaring darkness.

There is no escape from the darkness for Sonny and his family. Dreams and aspirations are always dispelled, the narrator comments, because someone will always "get up and turn on the light." "And when light fills the room," he continues, "the child is filled with darkness." Grieved by the death of his child, fortuitously named Grace, and aware of the age difference between himself and Sonny, the narrator seems unconsciously to seek out the childlike qualities of everyone he meets. He is not quite the self-satisfied conformist which some critics have made him out to be. He looks back toward a period in the lives of others when they presumably were not tormented by the need to choose between modes of living and to assert themselves. To the extent that he is given to this psychological penchant, the narrator is close in age to Sonny and "Sonny's Blues" is the story of the narrator's dawning self-awareness. The revelation of his father's brother's murder and the fact of Grace's death make Sonny's troubles real for the narrator and prompt the latter's growth in awareness.

To be aware of oneself, Baldwin believes, is to feel a sense of loss, to know where we are and what we've left behind. Sonny's presence forces the narrator to examine his own past; that is, the past which he left behind in the ghetto ("the vivid, killing streets of our childhood") and, before that, in the South. "Some escaped the trap," the narrator notes, "most didn't." "Those who got out always left something of themselves behind," he continues, "as some animals amputate a leg and leave it in the trap." The image is violent and is in keeping with the narrator's tendency to see people "encircled by disaster." The violence reminds us of the fate of the narrator's uncle, a kind of black Orpheus who, carrying his guitar, was deliberately run-down by a group of drunken whites. The narrator's father, we are told, was permanently disturbed by the slaughter of his brother. The age difference between the narrator and Sonny, like that between the narrator and his uncle and that between Sonny and his fellow musician Creole, all suggest that the fates of the generations are similar, linked by influences and effects. "The same things happen," the narrator reflects, "[our children will] have the same things to remember."

So, too, the story is cyclical. We begin in the present, move into the immediate past, then into the more remote past of the narrator's family, then forward to the time of the narrator's marriage and his early conversations with Sonny about his proposed career as a musician, thereafter to Sonny's release from prison and his most

recent discussion of music ("It makes you feel—in control"), and finally to the night club episode in the immediate present. Similarities in characters and events link the various sections of the story. The barmaid in the opening section, who was "still keeping time to the music," and the boy whose bird-like whistling just holds its own amid the noise, are linked to the revivalists, whose "singing filled the air," and to Sonny, whose culture hero is "Bird" Parker and whose role is to create music rather than merely keep time. The revivalists are singing near the housing project whose "beat-looking grass lying around isn't enough to make [the inhabitants'] lives green." Looking like one of the narrator's schoolboys, Sonny watches the three sisters and brother in black and carries a notebook "with a green cover," emblematic of the creative life he hopes to lead. Unlike his brother's forced payment to the indigent, childlike man, Sonny drops change into the revivalists' tambourine and the instrument, with this gratuitous gift, turns into a "collection plate." The group has been playing "*If I could only hear my mother play again!*" and Sonny, after "faintly smiling," returns to this brother's home, as if in response to the latter's promise to their mother that he will safeguard Sonny. Recognizing Sonny as both a creative individual and a brother, the narrator is "both relieved and apprehensive."

The narrator's apprehension is justified in that he is about to witness Sonny's torturous rebirth as a creative artist. "But I can't forget—where I've been," Sonny remarks to his brother and then adds: "I don't mean just the physical place I've been, I mean where I've *been*. And *what* I've been." In terms which might recall Gerard Manley Hopkins' anguished sonnet "I wake and feel the fell of darkness," Sonny goes on to describe his own dark night of the soul: "I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? *my* stink, and I thought I'd die." Because of the enormous energy and dedication involved in his role as Blues musician, Sonny is virtually described as a sacrificial victim as well as an initiate into the mysteries of creativity. Somewhat like the Christ of *noli me tangere*, Sonny's smile is "sorrowful" and he finds it hard to describe his own terrible anguish because he knows that it can come again and he almost wonders whether it's worth it. Yet his anguish is not only personal but representative, for as he looks down from the window of his brother's apartment he sees "all that hatred and misery and love," and he notes that, "It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart." As the pressure mounts within Sonny, the author sets the scene for the final episode of the story.

Befitting the special evening which ends "Sonny's Blues," the locale shifts to the "only night club" on a dark down-town street. Sonny and the narrator pass through the narrow bar and enter a large, womblike room where Sonny is greeted with "Hello, boy" by a voice which "erupted out of all that atmospheric lighting." Indeed the atmosphere is almost grandly operatic in its stage quality. The booming voice belongs to the quasi-midwife, Creole, who slaps Sonny "lightly, affectionately," as if performing the birth rite. Creole is assisted by a "coal-black" demiurge, "built close to the ground," with laughter "coming up out of him like the beginning of an earthquake." As if to underscore the portentousness of this evening in Sonny's "kingdom," the narrator thinks that, "Here it was not even a question that [Sonny's] veins bore royal blood." The imagery of light now blends with that of water as the narrator, describing the light which "spilled" from the bandstand and the way in which Sonny seems to be "riding" the waves of applause, relates how Sonny and the other musicians prepare to play. It is as if Sonny were about to undergo another stage in his initiation into mature musicianship, this time a trial by fire. "I had the feeling that they, nevertheless, were being most careful not to step into that circle of light too suddenly," the narrator continues, "that if they moved into the light too suddenly, without thinking, they would perish in flame." Next the imagery suggests that Sonny is embarking upon a sacred and perilous voyage, an approach to the wholly other in the biblical sense of the phrase; for the man who creates music, the narrator observes, is "hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air." The roaring darkness of the subway is transformed into something luminous. Appropriately, the lighting turns to indigo and Sonny is transfigured.

Now the focus again shifts to Creole, who seems to hold the musicians on a "short rein": "He wanted Sonny to leave the shore line and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing—he had been there, and he knew." Creole now takes on the dimensions of the

traditional father-figure. He is a better teacher than the narrator because he has been in the deep water of life; he is a better witness than Sonny's father because he has not been "burned out" by his experiences in life. Creole's function in the story, to put it prosaically, is to show that only through determination and perseverance, through the taking of a risk, can one find a proper role in life. To fail does not mean to be lost irretrievably, for one can always start again. To go forward, as Sonny did when Creole "let out the reins," is to escape the cycle which, in the ghetto of the mind, stifles so many lives, resulting in mean expectations and stunted aspirations. The narrator makes the point that the essence of Sonny's blues is not new; rather, it's the age-old story of triumph, suffering, and failure. But there is no other tale to tell, he adds, "it's the only light we've got in all this darkness."

Baldwin is no facile optimist. The meaning of "Sonny's Blues" is not, to use the glib phrase, the transcendence of the human condition through art. Baldwin is talking about love and joy, tears of joy because of love. As the narrator listens to his brother's blues, he recalls his mother, the moonlit road on which his uncle died, his wife Isabel's tears, and he again sees the face of his dead child, Grace. Love is what life should be about, he realizes; love which is all the more poignant because involved with pain, separation, and death. Nor is the meaning of "Sonny's Blues" the belief that music touches the heart without words; or at least the meaning of the story is not just that. His brother responds deeply to Sonny's music because he knows that he is with his black brothers and is watching his own brother, grinning and "soaking wet." This last physiological detail is important, not just imaginatively, because Baldwin is not sentimentalizing his case in "Sonny's Blues." The narrator is well aware, for example, that his profound response to the blues is a matter of "only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as tiger"—a great cat ready to destroy the birdlike whistling—"and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky." The final point of the story is that the narrator, through his own suffering and the example of Sonny, is at last able to find himself in the brotherhood of man. Such an identification is an act of communion and "Sonny's Blues" ends, significantly, with the image of the homely Scotch-and-milk glass transformed into "the very cup of trembling," the Grail, the goal of the quest and the emblem of initiation.

Criticism: Louis H. Pratt (essay date 1978)

SOURCE: "The Fear and the Fury," in *James Baldwin*, Twayne Publishers, 1978, pp. 31-49.

[In the following excerpt, Pratt discusses the ways in which Sonny is portrayed as the older and wiser of the brothers in "Sonny's Blues."]

The life of the black man in America today is replete with crucial crises on a day-to-day basis. His very existence is threatened by the inner conflict between the satisfaction of his basic needs and the nameless, paralyzing, and insurmountable fears—conscious and unconscious—which grow out of the experience of being black in a white-oriented society. These fears result in the imploding of the personality and render him incapable of coping effectively with the situations of life. In turn, the implosion gives rise to explosion, the sudden release of black fury from which white society has sought to cushion itself through the most brutal and savage means possible. It is this fear and this fury that Baldwin explores in *Going to Meet the Man*.

In "Sonny's Blues," for example, we encounter the first-person narrator, Sonny's brother, who is comfortably surrounded by the trappings of middle-class success. He has escaped "the vivid, killing streets" of Harlem, obtained a college education and a high school teaching job, and he has become firmly entrenched in middle-class traditions. Yet there is a sense of uneasiness as he stares at the newspaper announcing Sonny's arrest and observes "... my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside." He has yet to become aware of the enslaving darkness within himself.

Unaware of his origin and destiny—his identity—the narrator has fabricated an image of himself, and he has tried desperately to fashion his life in accordance with that image. He now lives with his family in a rundown apartment house and attempts to maintain the facade of middle-class respectability. He is now a "collaborator," an "accomplice" of his oppressors because, as Baldwin points out [in *A Dialogue*, with Nikki Giovanni], "they think it's important to be white, and you think it's important to be white; they think it's a shame to be black and you think it's a shame to be black. And you have no corroboration around you of any other sense of life. All the corroboration around you is in terms of the white majority standards...."

In a state of complacency, the narrator manages to sustain the charade until the news of Sonny's arrest begins to intrude upon his delusions. Although he had been "suspicious" about his brother's possible involvement with drugs, he could not reach out to help the boy. There was no way to reconcile Sonny's drug addiction with the white image which he had accepted for himself: "I couldn't find any room for it anywhere inside me. I had kept it outside me for a long time. I hadn't wanted to know ...". Similarly, the narrator's adherence to white standards rendered him unable to understand Sonny's preference for jazz over classical music: "I simply couldn't see why on earth he'd want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people pushed each other around on a dance floor. It seemed—beneath him, somehow ..."

In spite of these efforts, the narrator is unable to repress an inner anxiety resulting from the compulsive urge to discover his identity. He is deeply affected by the reminiscences of Sonny, the conversation with the talkative boy, and the encounter with the barmaid dancing to a "black and bouncy" tune. All of this begins to impinge upon his fabricated reality, and he discovers a powerful impulse to avoid the confrontation and to preserve his cherished illusion. Yet, in spite of himself, he begins to realize the need for "seeking ... that part of ourselves which had been left behind."

For the older brother, Sonny becomes a living embodiment of his identity and heritage, and it dawns upon the narrator's consciousness that he must find a way to open a line of communication with that past. But in the Baldwin canon, this channel can be opened only through personal suffering. Thus, the untimely death of the narrator's little girl Grace serves as a bridge to Sonny's anguish and experience and reunites the brothers.

At this point, Sonny's remarkable insight into the nature of suffering as an unavoidable aspect of daily life becomes apparent: "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 realize *nobody's* listening. So *you've* got to listen. You got to find a way to listen." It is this perception, this sense of frustration, that characterizes the younger brother's superior wisdom. As the older brother listens to "Am I Blue?" he grows in the knowledge that the story of human suffering, which is as old as recorded time, must continue to be sung and listened to, because it alone can shed a ray of light on the massive darkness in our lives. It was here, in Sonny's "world," in Sonny's "kingdom," that a full awareness dawned: "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." Thus, Sonny's brother has become liberated from the enslaving image of himself projected by white society. He has recovered a personal history and an ethnic pride, excavated from the ruins of his warped personality. He is now free to discover his own destiny. Sonny the teacher, by virtue of his experiences, becomes Sonny the elder, by virtue of his wisdom. Once the narrator draws near to listen, the blues becomes the means by which Sonny is able to lead his brother, through a confrontation with the meaning of life, into a discovery of self.

Criticism: Edward Lobb (essay date Summer 1979)

SOURCE: "James Baldwin's Blues and the Function of Art," in *The International Fiction Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer, 1979, pp. 143-51.

[In the following essay, Lobb discusses Baldwin's characterization of the nature and purpose of art in "Sonny's Blues," arguing that he juxtaposes key images and metaphors at a symbolic level distinct from that of the narrated events.]

James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues," first published in 1957, has been anthologized several times since its inclusion in Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* (1965). It is a fine and immediately appealing story, but it has never received critical treatment adequate to its complexity. The best analysis—an essay by John M. Reilly ["Sonny's Blues": James Baldwin's Image of Black Community," *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 2, July, 1970]—rightly asserts the centrality of the blues in the story as a means of personal and social communication. In the last scene, Reilly sees the reconciliation of the narrator and his brother (which certainly does occur) and an affirmation of the blues as "a metaphor of Black community." But the meaning of the blues is, as I hope to show, rather wider than Reilly seems to think, and is part of a larger theme which is conveyed almost wholly through the story's images. "Sonny's Blues" is Baldwin's most concise and suggestive statement about the nature and function of art, and is doubly artful in making that statement through life situations.

Throughout most of the story, the narrator is unable to understand his younger brother Sonny, who is a jazz pianist. He feels guilt at not having looked after Sonny, but is really incapable of understanding what has driven Sonny to heroin. Sonny himself is not too articulate on the subject when he writes to his brother from prison: he says "I guess I was afraid of something or I was trying to escape from something and you know I have never been very strong in the head (smile)." This "something" is never precisely defined, but it is always associated with darkness. Sonny writes that he feels "like a man who's been trying to climb up out of some deep, real deep and funky hole and just saw the sun up there, outside," and the temptation is to suppose that the bleak life of Harlem is "the danger he had almost died trying to escape." In part it is: Sonny says that he has to get out of Harlem, and he escapes first to the navy, then to Greenwich Village. The narrator realizes that Harlem is a place without a future; he sees his students' heads bump "against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities" and thinks that "all they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together than they were at any other time, and more alone." But if the danger were simply the grim facts of life in Harlem—the poverty, the lack of a future, the dope, the seemingly impenetrable wall of white racism—surely the narrator, and Sonny, could be more precise about them.

The fact that they are not is an indication that these things are simply aspects of the larger terror of existence in a universe devoid of meaning. The narrator imagines (and remembers) a child's first awareness of this terror, again employing the metaphor of darkness; ironically, the child's awareness comes after the reassurances of church and a Sunday dinner.

And the living room would be full of church folks and relatives. There they sit, in chairs all around the living room, and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the windowpanes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it's real quiet in the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside.... Everyone is looking at something a child can't see. For a minute they've forgotten the children.... Maybe there's a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frighten the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop—will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won't be sitting around the living room, talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kinfolk.

But something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end, is already ending.

This first sense of the world's darkness—its menace—is soon borne out by experience. The narrator's mother tells him about his uncle's death and its effect on his father: "Your Daddy was like a crazy man that night and for many a night thereafter. He says he never in his life seen anything as dark as that road after the lights of that car had gone away." The "hole" that Sonny is in, then, is a metaphysical one, the result of his sense that the world is a place of meaningless pain. He writes from prison, "I wish I could be like Mama and say the Lord's will be done, but I don't know it seems to me that trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped and I don't know what good it does to blame it on the Lord. But maybe it does some good if you believe it."

There is, of course, no escape from this darkness. The only things that can make it tolerable are human companionship and perhaps some kind of awareness of the truth of our situation. The latter is traditionally associated with light, and it seems natural that light in this story should be the means of saving the characters from the menace of darkness. We know from Sonny's prison letter that he has seen "the sun up there, outside"; but most of the references to light suggest that it is even worse than the darkness. The headlights of the car that kills the narrator's uncle, for example, simply intensify the blackness they leave behind, and the children in the darkening living room are made more apprehensive when the light is turned on.

In a moment someone will get up and turn on the light. Then the old folks will remember the children and they won't talk any more that day. And when light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows that every time this happens he's moved just a little closer to that darkness outside. The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk any more because if he knows too much about what's happened to *them*, he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to *him*.

Sonny for one has learned too much too soon, and has fled to heroin as a result.

The dialectic of the story so far is uncompromisingly bleak. The only thing worse than the pain of existence is full consciousness of that pain; knowledge is presumably desirable but unquestionably dangerous, and there seems to be no way of acquiring it without being annihilated, mentally or physically, by its blinding white light. Even in the last scene of the story the musicians avoid the spotlight, knowing what it means. The narrator describes them as being "most careful not to step into that circle of light too suddenly:... if they moved into the light too suddenly, without thinking, they would perish in flame." The resolution of the difficulty is beautifully simple and thematically apt. The lights on the bandstand turn "to a kind of indigo" and in this muted light—a mixture of light and darkness—the musicians begin to play, at first hesitantly, then with growing confidence. "Without an instant's warning, Creole started into something else, it was almost sardonic, it was 'Am I Blue.' And, as though he commanded, Sonny began to play. Something began to happen. And Creole let out the reins." Playing the blues in a blue light, they achieve an equipoise. The darkness of the human situation is there in the light and the music, as is the light of our awareness; but the annihilating power of each is controlled and shaped by art. "Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it must always be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness."

In that complex experience comes comfort—the knowledge that others have suffered and endured. The narrator remembers his uncle's death and his daughter's, but is gladdened: "It [Sonny's performance] was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting." What the narrator

discovers is the paradox of the blues and of tragedy generally—that melancholy subject matter can be beautifully rendered, without essential distortion, and produce a kind of joy. The experience is not prettified, any more than the white light of knowledge is extinguished by the blue filter; but the *form* of the vision makes it tolerable and saves us from its destructive energy. Nothingness itself assumes a shape; "the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and 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. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours." In this scene, as Reilly rightly points out, the narrator comes to understand his brother and his own place in the community; the community he acknowledges, however, is not the black community alone but the whole human community of suffering.

The opposed images of darkness and light, and their paradoxical reconciliation in the blue spotlight, outline the essential thematic movement of "Sonny's Blues," the very title of which can now be seen as a punning oxymoron. The theme is reinforced by another pair of images which deserve discussion—those of sound and silence.

Music is traditionally associated with order of one kind or another (the music of the spheres, etc.), and in the last scene of the story music communicates a tragic sense of life. Listening, then, is an attempt to understand the nature of things. Sonny says, "And other times—well, I needed a fix, I needed to find a place to lean, I needed to clear a space to *listen*." The problem comes when one listens and hears nothing. Silence, like darkness, is a form of absence, a something *not* there, a quality of the void; and when Sonny listens he apparently hears only what Pascal called the terrifying silence of the interstellar spaces. Certainly the narrator has reason to associate silence and horror: the first sign of his daughter's polio is her silence after a fall. "When you have a lot of children you don't always start running when one of them falls, unless they start screaming or something. And, this time, Grace was quiet. Yet, Isabel says that when she heard that *thump* and then that silence, something happened in her to make her afraid. And she ran to the living room and there was little Grace on the floor, all twisted up, and the reason she hadn't screamed was that she couldn't get her breath." And, we recall, the children in the living room are frightened by the adults' silence as well as by the encroaching darkness. It is, then, no mere metaphor when the narrator says that Sonny in his teens "was at that piano playing for his life."

On the metaphysical level, silence is parallel to darkness; on the human level, it is indicative of a surrender to the coldness of the universe, a kind of moral death. Sonny expresses his rage by means of silence. When Isabel's family complains of the noise he makes at the piano, he stops playing, and his brother writes that "the silence of the next few days must have been louder than the sound of all the music ever played since time began." The narrator acknowledges his guilt about Sonny in similar terms: "... there stood between us, forever, beyond the power of time or forgiveness, the fact that I had held silence—so long!—when he had needed human speech to help him." After Sonny's release from prison the brothers do talk, but not with any real ease. "I wanted to say more, but I couldn't." It is only in the nightclub that any real communication occurs, and then in wordless ways. Sonny's music breaks the silence that has existed between the brothers, and breaks down the wall of reserve that has removed the narrator, for all practical purposes, from the human community. He teaches algebra—an abstract subject—and lives *above* Harlem in a housing project which "looks like a parody of the good, clean, faceless life." Himself almost faceless, he never reveals his name and says nothing about the effect his daughter's death had upon him: it is only as he listens to Sonny in the nightclub that he remembers the family's troubles and feels his tears begin to rise.

The moment of his redemption is no easy triumph of art, however. He remains aware "that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky." The music is, as poetry was for Robert Frost, a momentary stay against confusion, not an alternative to the real world. Lest the point be missed, Baldwin has included a guitar in the scene of the uncle's death: no Orphean lyre, it is destroyed along with its owner.

We have established, then, that Baldwin's ideas about the nature and function of art are conveyed more by the images of the story than by its narrative. Even in the last paragraph of "Sonny's Blues," new images appear to deepen the argument. The narrator sends a round of drinks to the band: "There was a long pause, while they talked up there in the indigo light and after a while I saw the girl put a Scotch and milk on top of the piano for Sonny. He didn't seem to notice it, but just before they started playing again, he sipped from it and looked toward me, and nodded. Then he put it back on top of the piano. For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling." Like many of Baldwin's images, this contains several levels of meaning. The drink is both a Damoclean sword and the cup of the brothers' communion of understanding; Donald Murray sees it as "the Grail, the goal of the quest and the emblem of initiation." It is also "the cup of trembling" referred to in Isaiah (51, 17-23). The passage alluded to suggests, in the context of the story, both despair ("There is none to guide her") and the universality of suffering—a suffering which is momentarily in abeyance, but which can return, like "the trouble stretched above us," at any moment.

Having said that, we have perhaps said enough; but a rereading of the story suggests other and deeper meanings in the image. There are repeated references in the story to trembling and shaking, usually as an appropriately fearful response to the silence and darkness of the world. At the beginning of the story, after reading of Sonny's arrest, the narrator encounters one of Sonny's old high school friends who is coming down from a "high," reentering the world, and "shaking as though he were going to fall apart." Later, when Sonny explains why some jazzmen use heroin, he says "It's not so much to *play*. It's to *stand* it, to be able to make it at all. On any level.... In order to keep from shaking to pieces." His own experience has shown him the necessity of facing the abyss: "I can never tell you. I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? *my* stink, and I thought I'd die if I couldn't get away from it and yet, all the same, I knew that everything I was doing was just locking me in with it.... I didn't know, I still *don't* know, something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink, but I didn't think that *that* was what I'd been trying to do—and—who can stand it?" What Sonny has learned is part of the lesson all tragic heroes learn in their extremity: when Gloucester says to Lear "O, let me kiss that hand," Lear answers, "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality."

The wrong way of coping with the trembling is to retreat into illusion, as one does with heroin; the right way is to face the abyss in the manageable form that art gives it. The trembling of the drink is the authentic human trembling in the face of the empty immensity of the universe, but it is controlled by art—by the form of the glass and by the piano which causes the trembling. Once again, we are presented with an image of potentially destructive energy controlled and contained, as the white light is controlled and contained by the blue filter. It would not be going too far, I think, to see in the drink itself another emblem, the Scotch representing the harshness of reality and the milk the smoothness of art.

"Sonny's Blues" is so complete a treatment of the art-theme that it includes bad art as well as good, and suggests its effects. Bad art, like heroin, is merely a refuge from the real world. Early in the story, in a passage cited earlier, the narrator mentions the boys who spend their time in "the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness." Like the blue spotlight, the movie screen is a modulated light; unlike the spotlight, it illuminates nothing, providing only sterile fantasies which feed the boys' rage. The narrator says that they are "at once more together than they were at any other time, and more alone." Their fellowship is as delusory as the version of reality on the screen, for they are united only in frustration and anger; each of them dreams alone, "vindictively." The blues, on the other hand, provide a real sense of community, as does the music of the street revival: "... the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last." The singers address each other as "Sister," anticipating the narrator's recognition of brotherhood (literal and figurative) in the last scene.

The other form of false art in the story, though it is mentioned only once, is television, and here again an image is paired with its opposite. At various points in the story the narrator finds himself by a window, and his looking out is obviously analogous in meaning to the act of listening. Sonny, more of a seeker than his brother, is drawn to the window "as though it were the lodestone rock." Most of the inhabitants of the housing project, on the other hand, "don't bother with the windows, they watch the TV screen instead."

Beyond the narrative events of "Sonny's Blues," then, is a level of symbolic discourse on the relation of art and life. Art is distinguished from fantasy by contrast with heroin and the cheap satisfactions of film and television; it is associated with light, sound, and form, and stands against darkness, silence, and "fear and trembling." But if it is to be good art and provide a true picture of experience, it must include the elements it fights against—hence the paradoxical nature of Baldwin's emblems of art: the union of darkness and light, of form and the trembling which shakes things apart, of the roar from the void and the order of music. These and the other pairs of opposites I have mentioned (sound and silence, window and television, tragic matter and joyous form) suggest that the whole story, including the characterization of the brothers, is based on the idea of contrast or paradox—a suspicion borne out by even the most casual details in the story. The narrator, for example, hears a boy whistling a tune which is, like the story itself, "at once very complicated and very simple."

But we should be loath to describe any story as though it were an essay, however fine. Critical paraphrase tends to reduce narrative to a structure of symbols and ideas, and what makes "Sonny's Blues" a compelling story is its rendering of life, not its comments on art. It is similar to Baldwin's other fiction in its insistence that people must understand their past if they are to have any future. The narrator must work through his and Sonny's past—as well as his father's and uncle's—if he is to move forward. In the nightclub, with his memories of hard times, he thinks that Sonny "could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did." This theme informs Baldwin's social criticism as well: America, too, must face the reality of its past and clear a space in which to listen. In "Sonny's Blues," the themes of art and life converge, for the chief obstacle to our obtaining a clear view of the past, individually or as a people, is simply our preference for bad art, for the pleasant lies which the media peddle and we in our sadness desire.

Criticism: Keith E. Byerman (essay date Fall 1982)

SOURCE: "Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity in 'Sonny's Blues'," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fall, 1982, pp. 367-72.

[*In the following essay, Byerman analyzes the narrator's discourse in "Sonny's Blues," arguing that his use of language necessarily contains and blunts the impact of his experiences. Byerman further states that Baldwin's body of work stands in ironic contradiction to the notion that language is insufficient to convey reality.*]

"Sonny's Blues" has generally been accorded status as the best of James Baldwin's short stories. It tells of the developing relationship between Sonny, a musician and drug addict, and the narrator, his brother, who feels a conflict between the security of his middle-class life and the emotional risks of brotherhood with Sonny. The critics, who differ on whether the story is primarily Sonny's or the narrator's, generally agree that it resolves its central conflict. If, however, resolution is not assumed but taken as problematical, then new thematic and structural possibilities are revealed. The story becomes a study of the nature and relationship of art and language. The commentary on the story has centered on the moral issue; the purpose of this essay is to focus on the underlying aesthetic question.

An excerpt from "Sonny's Blues"

Then he bought a record player and started playing records. He'd play one record over and over again, all day long sometimes, and he'd improvise along with it on the piano. Or he'd play one section of the record, one chord, one change, one progression, then he'd do it on the piano. Then back to the record. Then back to the piano.

Well, I really don't know how they stood it. Isabel finally confessed that it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound. And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them—naturally. They began, in a way, to be afflicted by this presence that was living in their home. It was as though Sonny were some sort of god, or monster. He moved in an atmosphere which wasn't like theirs at all. They fed him and he ate, he washed himself, he walked in and out of their door; he certainly wasn't nasty or unpleasant or rude, Sonny isn't any of those things; but it was as though he were all wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision all his own; and there wasn't any way to reach him.

At the same time, he wasn't really a man yet, he was still a child, and they had to watch out for him in all kinds of ways. They certainly couldn't throw him out. Neither did they dare to make a great scene about that piano because even they dimly sensed, as I sensed, from so many thousands of miles away, that Sonny was at that piano playing for his life.

But he hadn't been going to school. One day a letter came from the school board and Isabel's mother got it—there had, apparently, been other letters but Sonny had torn them up. This day, when Sonny came in, Isabel's mother showed him the letter and asked where he'd been spending his time. And she finally got it out of him that he'd been down in Greenwich Village, with musicians and other characters, in a white girl's apartment. And this scared her and she started to scream at him and what came up, once she began—though she denies it to this day—was what sacrifices they were making to give Sonny a decent home and how little he appreciated it.

Sonny didn't play the piano that day. By evening, Isabel's mother had calmed down but then there was the old man to deal with, and Isabel herself. Isabel says she did her best to be calm but she broke down and started crying. She says she just watched Sonny's face. She could tell, by watching him, what was happening with him. And what was happening was that they penetrated his cloud, they had reached him. Even if their fingers had been a thousand times more gentle than human fingers ever are, he could hardly help feeling that they had stripped him naked and were spitting on that nakedness. For he also had to see that his presence, that music, which was life or death to him, had been torture for them and that they had endured it, not at all for his sake, but only for mine. And Sonny couldn't take that. He can take it a little better today than he could then but he's still not very good at it and, frankly, I don't know anybody who is.

James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," in his Going to Meet the Man, Dial Press, 1965.

According to Jonathan Culler, resolution can be accomplished in a story when a message is received or a code deciphered [*Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, Cornell University Press, 1975]. In most cases the message is withheld in some manner—through deception, innocence, or ignorance—until a key moment in the narrative. In the case of "Sonny's Blues," however, the message is apparent from the beginning and is repeatedly made available to the narrator. The story, in part, is about his misreadings; more importantly, it is about his inability to read properly. The source of this inability is his reliance on a language that is at once rationalistic and metaphoric. His sentences are always complete and balanced, and his figurative language puts on display his literary intelligence. Even in the description of his own emotional states, the verbal pattern overshadows the experience. Whenever the message is delivered, he evades it through language; he creates and then reads substitute texts, such as the messenger, or distorts the sense of the message by changing it to fit his preconceived ideas.

The message is first presented in the simplest, most straightforward manner, as a newspaper story: "I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story." The information is clearly there, "spelled out," a text that cannot be ignored. But the narrator's immediate action is to refract his emotions through metaphor: "I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside." This oblique allusion to the underground man is followed in the next paragraph by a reference to the ice at the center of his emotional Inferno. What is noteworthy is that these images call attention to themselves as images and not simply as natural expressions of emotional intensity. His response has built into it a strong sense of the need for proper verbal expression. This deflection from emotion to art is accompanied by repeated statements on the impossibility of believing the message.

The second scene dramatizes and verifies the information presented by the newspaper story. The narrator encounters an addict who had been a friend of Sonny's. In fact, "I saw this boy standing in the shadow of a doorway, looking just like Sonny." Again there is a darkness and an explicit identification with Sonny. Again there is distancing through figurative language: "But now, abruptly, I hated him. I couldn't stand the way he looked at me, partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child." Such language prepares us for, while guaranteeing, the failed communication of this episode. The narrator is offered knowledge, but he chooses to interpret the messenger rather than the message. He expresses a desire to know, and remorse when he does not listen, but he also repeats his unwillingness to understand.

A further complication occurs when, in the midst of this encounter, the narrator turns his attention from the addict to the music being played in a bar. The mark of his refusal to know is in his act of interpreting those associated with the music. "The juke box was blasting away with something black and bouncy and I half watched the barmaid as she danced her way from the juke box to her place behind the bar. And I watched her face as she laughingly responded to something someone said to her, still keeping time to the music. When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the face of the semi-whore." Rather than listen to the conversation he is directly involved in, the narrator observes one he cannot possibly hear. In the process, he can distance himself by labeling the woman he sees. He is thereby at once protected from and superior to the situation. The music, a motif repeated in subsequent scenes, here is part of what the narrator refuses to know; he substitutes his words for the non-verbal communication that music offers. In telling the incident, he suggests that he is listening to the music to avoid the addict-messenger; in fact, their messages are identical, and he avoids both by imposing his verbal pattern.

A similar evasion occurs in the next major scene, which is a flashback, within a flashback. The narrator's mother, after hearing her son reassure her that nothing will happen to Sonny, tells him the story of his father and uncle, a story that parallels the one occurring in the present time of the narration. Her story, of the uncle's death and the father's inability to prevent it, is a parable of proper brotherly relationships. After telling the tale, she indicates its relevance: "'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.'" The narrator immediately offers his interpretation: "'Don't you worry, I won't forget. I won't let nothing happen to Sonny.'" His mother corrects his impression: "'You may not be able to stop nothing from happening. But you got to let him know you's *there*.'"

No ambiguity can be found here. The message is clearly delivered, in transparent, non-metaphoric language. What prevents it from being received can only be the substitutions in the pattern. The musically-talented uncle is Sonny's double and the helpless father is the narrator's. This parallel structure makes the point obvious to the reader, but the fact that it is *only* parallel justifies the continuation of the narrative. In his positivistic way, the narrator will not believe what does not occur to his immediate experience or what cannot be contained within his linguistic net. His mother's fatalistic message cannot be so contained. Thus, the story must continue until he has both evidence and the means of controlling it.

The final scene of the story, instead of validating the meaning, only deepens the ambiguity. The bar where Sonny plays and the people in it are presented as alien to the narrator's experience. The room is dark and narrow, suggestive not only of a birth passage, but also of the subway where the narrator first felt troubled by Sonny. The musicians tend to fit stereotypes of blacks: Creole, the band leader is "an enormous black man" and the drummer, "a coal-black, cheerful-looking man, built close to the ground ... his teeth gleaming like a lighthouse and his laugh coming up out of him like the beginning of an earthquake." The language grows more serious when the music itself begins:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even when on the rare occasion when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who created the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and 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.

Little preparation has been made for such a reaction to the music. The act of the musician seems a creative response to the impinging chaos described in the opening subway scene. But this perception springs full-bodied from the brow of a man who has repeatedly indicated his antagonism to such music. One resolution of this apparent contradiction might be found in his comment about the terrible wordlessness of what he is hearing. A man committed to language, he finds himself confronted with a form whose power seems precisely its ability to create order without language.

In this context, it is highly significant that he immediately undertakes to explain the music through the metaphor of conversation. "The dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums, Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted, sweet and high, slightly detached perhaps, and Creole listened, commenting now and then, dry, and driving, beautiful and calm and old." If the terror of the music is its lack of words, then to explain it *as* language is to neutralize its power. By creating the metaphor, the narrator can control his experience and limit its effect. He can make the music fit the patterns that he chooses.

This is not readily apparent in what he calls the "tale" of Sonny's music. "For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness." While music is changed to language, with the attendant change in meaning, and while the obsession is still with bringing light and thus reason, the narrator is opening up the meaning with reference to "we" and to the emotional conditions of suffering and delight. His language seems less logical and self-consciously artistic than before.

The specifics of the tale strengthen its emotional impact. The music frees the narrator and perhaps Sonny: "Freedom lurked around us and 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." The narrator's freedom comes through his recapturing and acceptance of the past; the music conjures up his mother's face, his uncle's death, Grace's death accompanied by Isabel's tears "and I felt my own tears begin to rise." Yet for all the emotional content, the form remains very logically, artistically structured. Sentences are very carefully balanced and arranged, the emotion is carried on such verbs as "saw" and "felt," and finally "we," after a series of generalizations, quickly becomes "I" again. This scene only has to be compared to the prologue of *Invisible Man* to demonstrate the extent of control. Both scenes deal with the emotional impact of the blues, but whereas Ellison's is surrealistic and high paradoxical, with its narrator barely living through the history of the vision, Baldwin's narrator remains firmly planted in the bar and firmly in control of the emotion he describes.

The story's underlying ambiguity has its richest expression in the final metaphor, a cocktail that the narrator sends to Sonny. As a symbolic representation of the message of the narrative, the scotch and milk transformed into the cup of trembling suggests the relief from suffering that YHWH promised the children of Israel. Thus,

Sonny's suffering will be made easier by the narrator's willingness to be involved in his life. But, as in earlier cases, this is not the only possible reading. First, the drink itself, scotch and milk, is an emblem of simultaneous destruction and nurture to the system; it cannot be reduced to one or the other. Sonny's acceptance of it indicates that his life will continue on the edge between the poison of his addiction and the nourishment of his music.

The narrator's reading of the drink as the cup of trembling offers a second ambiguity, which is not consistent with the first, for it implies clear alternatives. The cup of trembling was taken from Israel when YHWH chose to forgive the people for their transgressions. But it was YHWH who had given the cup of suffering to them in the first place [see Isaiah 51:17-23]. Thus, it becomes important to the meaning of the story which verse is being alluded to in the metaphor. If the cup is given, then Sonny will continue to suffer and feel guilt; if the cup is taken away, then Sonny returns to a state of grace. There is no Biblical reference to the cup merely remaining.

The choice of image indicates the continuation of the narrator's practice of reading events through the vehicle of his own language. But the very limits of language itself raise problems as to the meaning of the narrative. The need to turn an act into a metaphor and thereby "enrich" the meaning depends upon limitation in the use of language. The words, though, carry traces of meaning not intended. The result, as in this case, can be that the meaning can carry with it its very opposite. In such a situation, intended meaning is lost in the very richness of meaning.

"Sonny's Blues," then, is a story of a narrator caught in the "prison-house of language" [Byerman points out in a footnote that this phrase comes from the title of a book by Frederic Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, 1972]. Both in describing experiences and explaining them, he is locked into a linguistic pattern that restricts his understanding. With the presentation of such a character, Baldwin offers an insight into the limits of language and the narrative art. In the very act of telling his story, the narrator falsifies (as do all story-tellers) because he must use words to express what is beyond words. The irony is that much of Baldwin's own writing—essays, novels, stories—is premised on the transparency and sufficiency of language rather than on its duplicity.

Clearly a dialectic is at work. "Sonny's Blues" moves within the tension between its openly stated message of order and a community of understanding and its covert questioning, through form, allusion, and ambiguity, of the relationship between life and art. With the latter, the story suggests that literary art contributes to deceit and perhaps anarchy rather than understanding and order. What makes this tension dialectical is that the artifice of narration is necessary for the existence of the story and its overt message. The measure of Baldwin's success is his ability to keep this tension so well hidden, not his ability to resolve the conflict. What finally makes "Sonny's Blues" such a good story is its author's skill at concealing the fact that he must lie in order to tell the truth.

Criticism: Richard N. Albert (essay date 1984)

SOURCE: "The Jazz-Blues Motif in James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues'," in *College Literature*, Vol. XI, No. 2, 1984, pp. 178-85.

[In the following essay, Albert discusses the meaning of Baldwin's references to blues and jazz in "Sonny's Blues," suggesting that what appear on first inspection to be inconsistencies that betray Baldwin's incomplete knowledge of the music, may in fact be deliberate "contraries" designed to enhance the inclusive, humanistic closing theme.]

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," a popular selection among editors of anthologies used in introductory college literature courses, is one of his most enduring stories because it is less polemical than many of his latter efforts and because it offers several common literary themes: individualism, alienation, and "Am I my brother's keeper?" The story has also generated some perceptive critical views, some of which emphasize Baldwin's metaphorical use of the blues. However, none of the criticism bothers to look more closely at the significance of the jazz and blues images and allusions in relation to the commonly-agreed-upon basic themes of individualism and alienation.

A closer examination of Baldwin's use of jazz and blues forms and of Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, the character Creole, and the song, "Am I Blue?" reveals some solid support for the basic themes, as well as some possible important thematic and structural flaws that might cause some readers to question whether Baldwin really understood the nature of the jazz/blues motif that he used. On the other hand, he may have intentionally injected "contraries" that imply an interpretation which emphasizes a coming together in harmony of *all* people—not just Sonny's brother and his people and culture.

The blues, both as a state of being and as music, are basic to the structure of the story. [In his *Stomping the Blues*, 1976] Albert Murray says, "The blues as such are synonymous with low spirits," and both the narrator and his brother Sonny have had their share. The narrator's major source of discontent has been his selfish desire to assimilate and lead a "respectable," safe life as a high-school algebra teacher. When he learns of Sonny's troubles with drugs and the law, he feels threatened. Sonny, on the other hand, has a stormy relationship with his father. He is unhappy in Harlem and hates school. He becomes alienated from his brother because of his jazz-oriented life style and his continued attraction to Greenwich Village. Finally, Sonny's using and selling heroin leads to a jail sentence.

The blues as music, as opposed to "the blues as such," take into account both form and content. In this story, content (message) is all important. As music, the blues are considered by many blacks to be a reflection of and a release from the suffering they endured through and since the days of slavery. [In *The Jazz Book*, 1975] Joachim Berendt says, "Everything of importance in the life of the blues singer is contained in these [blues] lyrics: Love and racial discrimination; prison and the law; floods and railroad trains and the fortune told by the gypsy; the evening sun and the hospital ... Life itself flows into the lyrics of the blues...." When Sonny plays the blues at the end of the story, it is the black heritage reflected in the blues that impresses itself upon Sonny's brother and brings him back into the community of his black brothers and sisters.

Beyond this basic use of the blues motif as background for the unhappiness of the narrator and Sonny and their resultant alienation from one another, Baldwin uses the jazz motif to emphasize the theme of individualism. Sonny is clearly Thoreau's "different drummer." He is a piano player who plays jazz, a kind of music noted for individuality because it depends on each musician's ability to improvise his or her own ideas while keeping in harmony with the progression of chords of some tune (often well-known). It has often been described as being able to take one's instrument, maintain an awareness of one's fellow players in the group, and in this context spontaneously "compose a new tune" with perhaps only a hint of the original remaining, except at the beginning and end of the number. [In his *Shadow and Act*, 1964] Ralph Ellison refers to this as the jazz musician's "achieving that subtle identification between his instrument and his deepest drives which will allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity."

One of the greatest jazz improvisers of all time was Charlie Parker, Baldwin's choice as the jazz musician that Sonny idolizes. No better choice could have been made. Parker was one of a group of young musicians in the late 1940s and early 1950s who played what was called bebop, or bop. They developed new and difficult forms—faster tempos, altered chords, and harmonies that involved greater ranges of notes which were frequently played at blistering speeds. Parker was more inventive and proficient than any of the others. His records are widely collected today, especially by young, aspiring jazz musicians, and he remains an

inspiration to many. An individualist beyond compare not only in his music, but also in his life style, he died in 1955 at the age of 34, the victim of over-indulgence in drink, drugs, and sex.

That Sonny should have Parker, whose well-known nickname was "Bird," as an idol is important. Parker flew freely and soared to the heights in all aspects of his life. He was one of a kind and he became a legend ("Bird Lives" is a popular slogan in jazz circles even today). Sonny's life begins to parallel Parker's early. [In his *The Jazz Book*] Joachim Berendt says of Parker: "He lived a dreary, joyless life and became acquainted with narcotics almost simultaneously with music. It is believed that Parker had become a victim of 'the habit' by the time he was 15." So also, it seems, had Sonny. A further reference to Parker is made when the narrator thinks of Sonny when he hears a group of boys outside his classroom window: "One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds." The key words in this passage are "complicated," "bird," and "holding its own through all those other sounds," all of which evoke the image of Bird Parker blowing his cool and complicated improvisations over the accompaniment of the other members of a jazz combo.

When Sonny tells his brother that he is interested in playing *jazz*, the essential difference of the two brothers becomes evident. Sonny expresses his admiration for Charlie Parker, whom the older brother had never heard of. For the narrator, jazz means Louis Armstrong. Armstrong certainly was a highly-regarded, popular jazz musician—probably the best known in the world, having become known as Ambassador Satch because of his frequent trips abroad—but among bop musicians he represented the older, more traditional form of jazz.

Baldwin's equating Sonny with Parker and his brother with Armstrong is important because it emphasizes the difference between the two brothers with reference to both individualism and knowing oneself. Sonny refers to Armstrong as "old-time" and "down home." There is a strong Uncle Tom implication in this and it is true that Armstrong was viewed this way by many of the young black musicians in the 1940s and 1950s. Had Armstrong become "the white man's nigger"? Had Sonny's brother? Probably so. He had tried, as best he could, to reject his black self through becoming a respectable math teacher and dissociating himself from black culture as much as possible. He was careful not to do those things that he felt whites expected blacks to do. Baldwin understood this attitude, acknowledging that only when he went to Europe could he feel comfortable listening to Bessie Smith, the well-known black blues singer of the 1920s and early 1930s. However, in fairness to Sonny's brother, it must be noted that after World War II bop musicians and their music were the subject of considerable controversy. [In their *Jazz: A History of the New York Scene*, 1962] Samuel Charters and Leonard Kunstadt observe: "The pathetic attempts of Moslem identification, the open hostility, the use of narcotics—everything was blamed on bop. It was the subject of vicious attacks in the press, the worst since the days of 'Unspeakable Jazz Must Go,' and the musicians were openly ridiculed." It is in this context that we must consider the narrator's concern about Sonny and the life style that he seems to be adopting.

Up to the final section of the story, Baldwin uses jazz references well, but then some surprising "contraries" begin to appear. As Sonny begins to play his blues in the last scene, he struggles with the music, which is indicative of how he struggles with his life: "He and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped; started another way, panicked, marked time, started again; then seemed to have found a direction, panicked again, got stuck." As Sonny flounders about, Baldwin brings into play two key references that lead and inspire Sonny to finally find himself through his music: The character of Creole and the playing of the song "Am I Blue?" Baldwin's use of these two elements is, to say the least, unusual.

The use of Creole as the leader of the group Sonny plays with in this last and all-important section of the story is paradoxical. Baldwin seems to be emphasizing Sonny's bringing his brother back to a realization of the importance of his roots as epitomized in Sonny's playing of the blues. Why did Baldwin choose a leader who is not strictly representative of the black heritage that can be traced back through the years of slavery to West

Africa with its concomitant blues tradition that includes work songs, field hollers, and "African-influenced spirituals"? [According to James Collier in *The Making of Jazz*, 1979] Creoles were generally regarded as descendants of French and Spanish settlers in Louisiana. Over the years, many Creole men took as mistresses light-skinned girls and produced that class referred to as black Creoles, many of whom passed for white and set themselves above the Negroes. From the early 1800s they were generally well-educated and cultured, some even having gone to Europe to attend school. Music was also an important part of life among the Creoles. According to James Collier (and this is very important for the point I am making),

... The black Creole was what was called a "legitimate" musician. He could read music; he did not improvise; and he was familiar with the standard repertory of arias, popular songs, and marches that would have been contained in any white musician's song bag. The point is important: The Creole musician was entirely European in tradition, generally scornful of the blacks from across the tracks who could not read music and who played those "low-down" blues.

After the Civil War, the advent of Jim Crow laws deeply affected the status of black Creoles. In particular, the passage of Louisiana Legislative Code III was devastating in that it declared that any person "with any black ancestry, however remote, would be considered black." Many Creoles with musical training were hard hit and sought work as musicians. The competition with Negroes was keen and unpleasant, but eventually, Leroy Ostransky notes [in his *Jazz City*, 1978], both groups "discovered each other's strengths and the resulting synthesis helped bring about the first authentic jazz style, what came to be called the New Orleans style."

Though Creoles did contribute to the development of jazz as it is played in Baldwin's story, it must be remembered that the story seems to emphasize the importance of the strictly black experience and tradition, which for most people means the heritage that includes not only post-Emancipation Jim Crow laws, but also the indignities of slavery, the horrors of the middle-passage, and the cruelties of capture and separation from families in West Africa. The black Creoles were not distinctly a part of that culture.

The second confusing element in the last section of the story is Baldwin's use of the song "Am I Blue?" It is certainly not an example of the classic 12-bar, 3-lined blues form. However, it might be pointed out that in the context of this story it would not have to be, because Sonny is part of a jazz movement that is characterized by new ideas. Nevertheless, we must not forget the main thrust of the last scene: The narrator's rebirth and acceptance of *his* heritage. Certainly most musicologists would agree that blues music has a complexity that includes contributions from many sources, but the choice of song is questionable for other reasons.

It would have seemed appropriate for Baldwin to have chosen some song that had been done by one of his favorite blues singers, Bessie Smith. In *Nobody Knows My Name* he says: "It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and her cadence, who helped me dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep." In relation to the idea of the narrator's rebirth through his experience of hearing Sonny play the blues, choosing a song made famous by Bessie Smith would have been fitting and would have reflected Baldwin's personal experiences. But this is not the case.

Why did Baldwin choose "Am I Blue?" a song far-removed from the black experience? It was written in 1929 by composer Harry Akst and lyricist Grant Clarke, who were both white, as far as I can determine. Akst was born on New York's East Side, the son of a classical musician who played violin in various symphony orchestras and wished Harry to become a classical pianist. However, Harry became a composer of popular music and eventually worked with well-known show business personalities like Irving Berlin and Fred Astaire. One of his best-known songs is "Baby Face." Grant Clarke was born in Akron, Ohio, and worked as an actor before going to work for a music publisher. In 1912, his "Ragtime Cowboy Joe" became a hit.

Akst and Clarke wrote "Am I Blue?" specifically for Ethel Waters, an extremely popular black singer who had paid her dues and sung her share of the blues through the years, but who had by 1929 achieved fame on the stage and in films. The song was written for the film musical "On With the Show." Ethel Waters received a four-week guarantee in the making of the film at \$1,250 per week. Bessie Smith never achieved a comparable fame among general audiences. Ethel Waters seems to have been more in a class with Louis Armstrong in terms of general entertainment value and popularity. The bop musician's point of view was antithetical to the Uncle Tom image they had of Armstrong. Ralph Ellison observes: "The thrust toward respectability exhibited by the Negro jazzmen of Parker's generation drew much of its immediate fire from their understandable rejection of the traditional entertainer's role—a heritage from the minstrel tradition—exemplified by such an outstanding creative musician as Louis Armstrong [*Shadow and Act*]. Why would Baldwin choose a song made popular by Ethel Waters, rather than one by his favorite, Bessie Smith?"

All of this is not to say that "Am I Blue?" is not in the blues tradition in terms of message. The lyric expresses the sadness of a lonely woman whose man has left her, not unusual content for all forms of blues songs through the years. But it is what Paul Oliver refers to [in *The Meaning of the Blues*, 1963] as one of those "synthetic 'blue' compositions of the Broadway show and the commercial confections of 52nd Street that purport to be blues by the inclusion of the word in the titles." Therefore, in view of the song's origin, Baldwin's fondness for Bessie Smith, and the possible intent of Sonny's playing the blues to bring the narrator back to an acknowledgment and affirmation of his roots, the choice of this particular song seems inappropriate.

And yet Baldwin may have known what he was doing. Is it possible that in "Sonny's Blues" he is indicating that tradition is very important, but that change is also important (and probably inevitable) and that it blurs on tradition, which is never fully erased but continues to be an integral part of the whole? Ellison is again relevant here: "Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meaning of one's origins are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In doing so, it gives significance to all those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are." Both Ellison and Baldwin seem to be saying that we are an amalgam of many ingredients that have become fused over the centuries. We cannot separate ourselves, *all* people, from one another. Having Sonny, inspired by Creole, playing "Am I Blue?" for what we must assume is a racially mixed audience in a Greenwich Village club gives credence to these ideas and helps to explain what might otherwise appear to be some inexplicable incongruities.

Criticism: Michael C. Clark (essay date December 1985)

SOURCE: "James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': Childhood, Light, and Art," in *CLA Journal*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, December, 1985, pp. 197-205.

[In the following essay, Clark examines the ways in which Baldwin uses images of light and darkness in "Sonny's Blues."]

"Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin is a sensitive story about the reconciliation of two brothers, but it is much more than that. It is, in addition, an examination of the importance of the black heritage and of the central importance of music in that heritage. Finally, the story probes the central role that art must play in human existence. To examine all of these facets of human existence is a rather formidable undertaking in a short story, even in a longish short story such as this one. Baldwin not only undertakes this task, but he does it superbly. One of the central ways that Baldwin fuses all of these complex elements is by using a metaphor of childhood, which is supported by ancillary images of light and darkness. He does the job so well that the story is a *tour de force*, a penetrating study of American culture.

One of the most important passages in this story is the description of Harlem's stultifying environment, a place where children are "smothered": "Some escaped the trap, most didn't. Those who got out always left something of themselves behind, as some animals amputate a leg and leave it in the trap." The implicit assumption here is that childhood is a holistic state, whereas the process of growing older maims the individual. Indeed, there is frequent evidence throughout the story that Baldwin sees childhood as a touchstone by which to judge the shortcomings of adulthood.

One of the more explicit statements of this same theme occurs in flashback when the narrator remembers his own childhood home. There seems to be some autobiographical recollection here by Baldwin since he distances this material even from the fictitious narrator: in the course of this passage the boy narrator is transmuted into an autonomous and anonymous "child":

And the living room would be full of church folks and relatives. There they sit, in chairs all around the living room, and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the windowpanes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it's real quiet in the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside. And my mother rocks a little from the waist, and my father's eyes are closed. Everyone is looking at something a child can't see. For a minute they've forgotten the children. Maybe a kid is lying on the rug, half asleep. Maybe somebody's got a kid in his lap and is absent-mindedly stroking the kid's head. Maybe there's a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frightens the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop—will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won't be sitting around the living room, talking about where they've come from, and what they've seen, and what's happened to them and their kinfolk.

But something deep and watchful in the child knows that this is bound to end, is already ending. In a moment someone will get up and turn on the light. Then the old folks will remember the children and they won't talk any more that day. And when the light fills the room, the child is filled with darkness. He knows that everytime this happens he is moved just a little closer to that darkness outside. The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk any more because if he knows too much about what's happened to *them*, he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to *him*.

This passage has much of the same idea—and imagery—of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality": growing up is an initiation into the trouble of this world. Wordsworth characterizes youth as a time of "light"; adulthood, on the other hand, embraces us like the doors of a prison closing around us, darkening our lives. The imagery that Baldwin uses replicates Wordsworth's, as does in part his theme. In childhood man is in a holistic state, closer to a heavenly condition.

If growing up in general entails the losing of an envied state, then growing up in the ghetto is even worse. The high school kids that the narrator must teach show every evidence—even in their youth—of having already "matured":

I listened to the boys outside, downstairs, shouting and cursing and laughing. Their laughter struck me for perhaps the first time. It was not the joyous laughter which—God knows why—one associates with children. It was mocking and insular, its intent to denigrate. It was disenchanted, and in this, also, lay the authority of their curses.

These children are not children. Already, the seeds of their destruction are sown. These children are "growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage."

It is interesting to note that in the midst of this despair, the narrator's attention is grabbed by a solitary "voice" in the schoolyard: "One boy was whistling a tune, at once very complicated and very simple, it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds." As Suzy Goldman has astutely observed [in "James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': A Message in Music," *Negro Americans Literature Forum*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Fall, 1974], this passage foreshadows the concern of the story, for Sonny will be the "one" child who stands out in the otherwise bleak landscape; he is the "singer" in the midst of all the other sounds. And he is the one person through all his hardships who has managed to maintain an unalloyed vision—as vital as a child's—in the midst of complication. For in this story, childhood is the measure of the man.

Baldwin makes good use of the childhood imagery throughout the story. When Sonny's junkie friend comes to tell the narrator of the fate of Sonny, the reader is confronted with a picture of a grotesque child, a person who "though he was a grown-up man, he still hung around that block, still spent hours on the street corners." When he grins, "it made him repulsive and it also brought to mind what he'd looked like as a kid." Here, then, is the adult who has never accepted adult responsibility, a mature man whose "childlike" qualities emphasize his adult deformity. Childhood here serves as the measure of adult shortcomings. And it is not the last time that the image is used in this story.

When the junkie and the narrator are walking towards the subway station, they pass a bar and the narrator spies a barmaid inside: "When she smiled one saw the little girl, one sensed the doomed, still-struggling woman beneath the battered face of the semi-whore." She is just one more example of the trapped animal who has become deformed in order to survive. The "little girl" deserves much better.

It is in the context of such examples as this that the core of this story achieves meaning. This is, after all, a story about a "baby brother." But in order to understand Sonny's position in the world, we might first look at the illustrative example of his father. This story is told by the mother to the narrator. It is meant to be a parallel to the main action.

When the father and his brother (the narrator's uncle) were youths, they were happy-go-lucky spirits. The uncle loved music, as is evidenced by his guitar. One bright, moonlit night, the father and uncle were walking down a hill and the uncle was struck by a car driven by some white men, who did not stop. The "accident" is a blatant example of racism; the people in the vehicle are drunk and "aim the car straight at him." This anecdote, or symbolic tableau, is meant to provide a thematic backdrop to the narrator's own situation. He, too, has a brother that is musically oriented. The mother tells the story so that the narrator might be more diligent in looking after Sonny. The design of this anecdote, however, is further illuminating. This incident in the father's life is parallel to the narrator's description of what took place in the living room of his youth: it is a maturing experience, after which the father's life is never the same. It marks the critical moment when youth gives way to adulthood and responsibility. And this scene partakes of the same imagery that controls the living-room scene, as well as the rest of the story. Before the accident, it was "bright like day," while after the terrible accident, the father "says he never in his life seen anything as dark as that road after the lights of that car had gone away." This accident marks the transmutation of the father's life from youth to adulthood. In addition, the hand of the author is manifest in the controlling imagery, in the change from light to darkness.

So far this essay has shown that the light and dark imagery is pervasive in "Sonny's Blues" and that this imagery can be roughly equated with the respective conditions of childhood and adulthood. The question still remains as to how exactly this information can lead us to a better appreciation of Sonny's character. To begin, it might be useful to contrast the narrator and Sonny. There is some evidence for seeing Sonny as a

doppelganger for the narrator. At least, such lines as the following are susceptible to this interpretation: when the narrator discovers that Sonny has been arrested for heroin possession and use, he notes that "I couldn't believe it: but what I mean by that is that I couldn't find any room for it anywhere inside me. I had kept it outside me for a long time. I hadn't wanted to know." The *lawlessness* of Sonny is something that is excluded from the highly controlled rationality of the narrator, the very kind of split that we find in such classic stories of the "double" as Poe's "William Wilson." Let it suffice for our argument, however, to note only that the narrator possesses qualities that are ambiguous. He is certainly a "success"—he has a college degree and a conventional job teaching high school. He represents middle-class values. But more can be said. He teaches algebra, which suggests his devotion to the scientific and formulaic. When Sonny talks to him about music, he shows no empathy for jazz, especially not for the avant-garde music of players like Charlie "Bird" Parker.

Though the narrator has escaped the most terrible consequences of growing up in the ghetto, then, he still is maimed in some way—and he knows it. When he and Sonny are in a cab on the way to the narrator's apartment, he notes that "it came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind." Both of these characters have been damaged by life. It is significant, then, that the story opens with the narrator looking at a newspaper, reading about Sonny's arrest and then starting at the story "in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside." The narrator, indeed, is trapped in the darkness. Only the events of the story will show him how to escape.

Sonny's quest is best described by himself when he writes to the narrator: "I feel like a man who's been trying to climb up out of some deep, real deep and funky hole and just saw the sun up there, outside. I got to get outside." Sonny is a person who finds his life a living hell, but he knows enough to strive for the "light." As it is chronicled in this story, his quest is for regaining something from the past—from his own childhood and from the pasts of all who have come before him. The means for doing this is his music, which is consistently portrayed in terms of light imagery. When Sonny has a discussion with the narrator about the future, the narrator describes Sonny's face as a mixture of concern and hope: "[T]he worry, the thoughtfulness, played on it still, the way shadows play on a face which is staring into the fire." This fire image is reinforced shortly afterward when the narrator describes Sonny's aspirations once more in terms of light: "[I]t was as though he were all wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision all his own." To the narrator and to Isabel's family, the music that Sonny plays is simply "weird and disordered," but to Sonny, the music is seen in starkly positive terms: his failure to master the music will mean "death," while success will mean "life."

The light and dark imagery culminates in the final scene, where the narrator, apparently for the first time, listens to Sonny play the piano. The location is a Greenwich Village club. Appropriately enough, the narrator is seated "in a dark corner." In contrast, the stage is dominated by light, which Baldwin reiterates with a succession of images: "light ... circle of light ... light ... flame ... light." Although Sonny has a false start, he gradually settles into his playing and ends the first set with some intensity: "Everything had been burned out of [Sonny's face], and at the same time, things usually hidden were being burned in, by the fire and fury of the battle which was occurring in him up there."

The culmination of the set occurs when Creole, the leader of the players, begins to play "Am I Blue." At this point, "something began to happen." Apparently, the narrator at this time realizes that this music *is* important. The music is central to the experience of the black experience, and it is described in terms of light imagery:

Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

James Baldwin has written [in *A Rap on Race*, 1971] that "[h]istory is the present ... You and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history." Sonny's "blues" becomes an apt symbol in this story because Sonny has managed to look back at and *use* his own personal life of grief. But from the narrator's perspective, Sonny has looked back even further than that. Undoubtedly, he has looked back to his childhood, to that time before the "amputations" that formed his adult consciousness. This explains what the narrator means when he says that he "seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his." In the context of much of the other light imagery of the story (i.e., the time associated with the light of childhood), this image signifies in practical terms that music taps the very roots of existence, that it puts the artist in touch with the fluid emotions that he has known in perfection only as a child. But Sonny looks back not only to his own past, but also back to *all* the experience that makes up his history—which is the history of his race. Contained in the music that Sonny is playing is the culmination of all the suffering that Sonny and his race have suffered. Consequently, sorrow is transformed into a pure emotion that is not solitary but communal. The music becomes an expression of history: "He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever."

The implication of this story is that art—whether it be the music that Sonny plays or the fiction that Baldwin writes—can give us some temporary relief from brutal reality. The narrator sees Sonny's music as giving him a "moment" though "the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and ... trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky." Clearly, the moment is worth the effort.

Sonny has succeeded in making his life whole once again. Though he is an adult who has suffered much, who has suffered metaphoric "amputations," he has also through his music managed to recapture the holism that we usually associate with childhood. Baldwin emphasizes this when he has the narrator buy Sonny a drink at the close of the story: "a Scotch and milk." As Sonny began to play again, this drink sat atop the piano and "glowed." It is an apt symbol for the value of Sonny's success: milk, childhood, and light all suggest that this manchild has achieved a reconciliation with reality that is far superior to the narrator's conventional lifestyle.

Criticism: Ronald Bieganowski (essay date September 1988)

SOURCE: "James Baldwin's Vision of Otherness in 'Sonny's Blues' and *Giovanni's Room*," in *CLA Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 1, September, 1988, pp. 69-80.

[In the following excerpt, Bieganowski discusses the ways in which the characters in "Sonny's Blues" acquire self-knowledge and the implications such knowledge has for their relationships with others.]

For several decades now, James Baldwin has maintained his position of importance among black writers through his novels, stories, essays, and interviews, generating continued scholarly interest. In her recent book on Baldwin [*James Baldwin*, 1980], Carolyn Sylvander points to the "nuclear ideas and beliefs" around which Baldwin's works have developed and grown over the years. For many readers, Baldwin establishes as the basis of his fiction "the quest for identity," for "true, fundamental being" and the dislocations of the modern world. For instance, Shirley Ann Williams summarizes the core of Baldwin's fiction: "Most of his characters have at the center of their portrayal an isolation from the society, the culture, even each other" [Shirley Anne Williams, "The Black Musician: The Black Hero as Light Bearer," *James Baldwin: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Kenneth Kinnamon, 1974]. While Baldwin's characters do show deep alienation from the world about them and certainly from other people, most significantly Baldwin's major characters show a profound alienation from themselves. That tension directs the energies of his stories.

One of the most recurrent but least defined of Baldwin's nuclear ideas is his equation: "To encounter oneself is to encounter the other" [*The Devil Finds Work*]. For several of his important characters, reconciliation with

society and with each other can occur only after they have made peace with themselves. Two focal works, "Sonny's Blues" and *Giovanni's Room*, together define the full range of this equation between the *self* and *other* as well as reveal a recurrent process in his writings. As John Reilly suggests, Baldwin's "leading theme—the discovery of identity—is nowhere presented more successfully than in the short story 'Sonny's Blues.'" *Giovanni's Room*, often overlooked because it appears to be Baldwin's weakest novel, represents, in Robert Bone's judgment, "a key position in Baldwin's spiritual development" ["The Novels of James Baldwin," *Tri-Quarterly*, Winter, 1965]. Brother in "Sonny's Blues" and David in *Giovanni's Room* clearly focus Baldwin's vision of otherness requiring a profound sense of one's *self*.

For Baldwin, a fully human understanding of another person depends upon truthful self-knowledge: "One can only face in others what one can face in oneself" [*Nobody Knows My Name*]. This interdependence between a vision of otherness and one's sense of self operates vividly in Baldwin's fiction. Such mutual knowledge operates at significant levels in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *Another Country*, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and *Just Above My Head*. Specifically, Baldwin's masterfully fashioned "Sonny's Blues" can alert us to some brilliant facets of the larger, more roughly drawn, *Giovanni's Room*: Brother's understanding of himself allows him to recognize Sonny's pain as well as Sonny's own self-understanding; because David never comes fully to accept himself, he never truly loves Giovanni. Among Baldwin's writings, the two stories share a common narrative structure; they echo with comparable imagery, reflecting windows and mirror; most importantly, they address, with their central energies, this human truth based on the reciprocal knowledge of *self* and *other*. And finally, together these stories reveal Baldwin's larger devotion as artist to the freedom and fulfillment of the human person.

In each story, the narrator confronts his own self-image as he struggles with understanding, with love of the important other person in his life. Though Sonny's brother's preoccupation with himself makes him intolerant of Sonny's troubles, the pain and mystery of his daughter's death waken him to his wife's wound and to Sonny's need. Brother (Baldwin gives him no proper name) achieves his identity as Brother in his listening to Sonny. David, in *Giovanni's Room*, cannot turn his gaze fully away from himself toward Giovanni. David remains isolated in the egotism of his sympathies. As Robert Bone has pointed out, both Sonny and Giovanni share priestly roles as journeymen in suffering ["The Novels of James Baldwin"]. More significantly, however, the narrators—Brother and David—contain the dynamic tension in each story. "Sonny's Blues" begins with Brother staring at his own reflection in a subway window and closes with his watching Sonny play; *Giovanni's Room* begins with David watching his reflection in the "darkening gleam of the window pane" and ends with his image trapped in the bedroom's mirror. Each story gains its vitality from the intimacy each narrator gains with himself through feeling compassion for Sonny and Giovanni.

"Sonny's Blues" shows the narrator's (Brother's) growth from apparent self-reflection, really self-absorption, to authentic self-knowledge gained through honestly listening to Sonny himself. The story opens with Brother's shock at the news of Sonny's arrest for using and selling heroin. The first paragraph records Brother's astonishment at this news: "I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work.... I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside." Transfixed by Sonny's arrest, Brother identifies the dread reflected back to him in the subway window as finally dread not for Sonny but for himself: "I couldn't believe it: but what I mean by that is that I couldn't find any room for it anywhere inside me." Through Brother's further self-reflections, the story probes his feeling of being "trapped in the darkness which roared outside." Darkness outside reveals his own inner darkness.

Brother's reflection in the subway's window occurs simply because the train tunnel is darker than the lighted subway car. The outer darkness provides the background against which he can see himself. In an important reminiscence of his childhood, Brother describes the role outer darkness played at his family's Sunday night dinners. He remembers his mother along with older church folks and relatives on Sunday afternoon, talking after the big dinner:

There they sit, in chairs all around the living room and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the windowpanes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it's real quiet in the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside.

Brother's memory is from a child's perspective as he recalls that "everyone's looking at something a child can't see." An adult's stroking the child's forehead eases the fear caused by the coming night's blackness.

When the lights are turned on, the children are filled with inner darkness, confusion, insecurity. The children do not understand because they have not yet lived through outer darkness. In reminiscence, Brother recognizes what the adults then were seeing and talking about because now, as an adult, he understands that there exists outside a good deal of darkness. Brother's memory of those Sunday dinners ends with this recognition.

The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk anymore because if he knows too much about what's happened to *them*, he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to him.

Pain or suffering or death constitutes the bleak substance of experience from which these people fashion themselves. The adults, telling their stories, achieve a moment of authority over their experience and testify to the success, though perhaps minimal, with which, for the present, they have met the outer darkness. Because of the outer night, they have had to find inner light to live. In their talking, they bear witness as individuals and as a religious family to the presence of that inner light. After a painful argument, Brother leaves Sonny's room in the Village. With tears in his eyes, Brother whistles to himself, "*You going to need me, baby, one of these cold, rainy days.*" At that moment, Brother believes that he is addressing Sonny. Later, in the midst of his own outer darkness, Brother realizes that he needs Sonny. Only when Brother admits that he lives in the nightmare of his child's death can he then understand what the adults were talking about after dinner and what Sonny plays in his music. The day of his daughter's funeral, Brother can write Sonny in jail, recognizing, "My trouble made his real."

Sonny, of course, knows dim streets as well as heroin's blankness. For him music, the blues, instead of talking, helps tame the terror of the roaring night. Sonny, in telling his own blues, gains some sense of who he is. Talking, telling, and playing the blues require a reciprocal understanding that starts with one's own sense of self. Trying to explain to Brother why he must play, Sonny describes the self-knowledge, the self-possession, necessary for authentic blues, for meaningful talk.

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 realize *nobody's* listening. So *you've* got to listen. You got to find a way to listen.

The loneliness of Sonny's own storm tempers his spirit so that he gains some momentary hold on himself. Though precarious, incomplete, and temporary, that sense of himself allows him to speak through his music. (Ida Scott, in *Another Country*, sings movingly not because of her vocal power but because she sings out of a profound sense of self.) As Sonny achieves a sense of identity through suffering his private pain, so analogously does Brother deepen his sense of self when he finds room inside for Sonny and his trouble.

While listening to a gospel singer in the street, Sonny recognizes in her song a parallel to his own trial: "Listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much she must have had to go through—to

sing like that. It's *repulsive* to think you have to suffer that much." When Sonny tells through music his tale of suffering, Brother hears corroborated his own pain: his daughter's death and his temporary rejection of Sonny. In that moment of reciprocal understanding, Brother knows that "the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air." For Brother, the musician, the artist addresses the darkness outside:

For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

For Brother, Sonny's blues replaces the family's talk after Sunday dinner. Sonny, in the night club's center light, offers hope to those in the circles of darkness outside. As John Reilly concludes, Sonny, with his insight into suffering, can lead Brother to a discovery of self in community [see "'Sonny's Blues': James Baldwin's Image of Black Community," in *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 2, July 1970]. Brother recognizes Sonny with his own "cup of trembling." He finally listens to Sonny telling how he suffers; in that listening Brother hears his own storm inside. Now he can fully acknowledge Sonny as "my brother." In affirming that relationship, Brother takes possession of his own identity. He who had no proper name throughout the story has learned who he is from Sonny. Brother, in saying "my brother" of Sonny, necessarily says "brother" of himself.

.....

In "Sonny's Blues," this reciprocal vision of otherness is also described in the imagery of music. At the nightclub where Sonny plays his blues, Brother says:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations.

Brother, of course, finally has that something open within and he can really hear Sonny's blues. David appears never to really hear Giovanni, fearing corroboration from Giovanni of the needs deep within David himself. Other Baldwin characters also struggle to gain their own self-understanding as they come to know another more deeply; certainly Leo Proudhammer of *Tell Me How Long* and Hall Montana of *Just Above My Head* do so.

Brother goes on with his consideration of music as he describes the musician. The artist hears something other than person, private, vanishing evocations. The musician addresses the roar rising from the void and imposes order on it. Sonny's playing provides a moment of revelation for Brother and for the reader. Sonny leads Brother to understanding himself and others through listening to the blues. In his vision of otherness, James Baldwin, through Brother's and David's telling their tales, leads his reader to human truth.

Some years before publishing these stories, Baldwin offered a description of the truth he believes fiction must approach. He writes in "Everybody's Protest Novel":

Let us say, then, that truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment.

Baldwin distinguishes this devotion to the human being from devotion to humanity, wanting to avoid devotion to a cause or to a cultural invention. He specifies this truth necessary to fiction by identifying what a human being is. The human person is

... something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves. It is this power of revelation which is the business of the novelist, this journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all other claims.

The reciprocal understanding necessary for Brother and Sonny and for David and Giovanni defines the reciprocal vision necessary to seeing the truth in Baldwin's fiction. One can only face in Baldwin's writing what one can face in oneself. For Baldwin, "our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is accept it."

Criticism: Pancho Savery (essay date 1992)

SOURCE: "Baldwin, Bebop, and 'Sonny's Blues'," in *Understanding Others: Cultural and Cross-Cultural Studies and the Teaching of Literature*, edited by Joseph Trimmer and Tilly Warnock, National Council of Teachers of English, 1992, pp. 165-76.

[Savery is an American critic and educator who has written extensively on African-American literature. In the following excerpt, he discusses the historical and musical contexts relevant to "Sonny's Blues," noting in particular the social, political, and aesthetic significance of the form of jazz known as Bebop.]

Although there have been interesting analyses of "Sonny's Blues," none of them has gotten to the specificities of the music and the wider cultural implications. Music is not simply the bridge the narrator crosses to get closer to Sonny, nor is it sufficient to point out that the music in the climactic scene is labeled as blues. What kind and form of these particular blues make all the difference.

An interesting way to begin thinking about "Sonny's Blues" is to think about when the story is supposed to be taking place. We know from the acknowledgments that it was first published in the summer of 1957, but can we be more precise? Part of the story takes place during "the war," but which one is it, Korea or World War II, and does it matter?

Baldwin tells us that Sonny's father "died suddenly, during a drunken weekend in the middle of the war, when Sonny was fifteen." "[J]ust after Daddy died," Sonny's brother, whom we know is seven years older, is "home on leave from the army," and has his final conversation with his mother. In the passage, which begins with that wonderful evocation of the coming of the darkness on Sunday afternoon with the old and young together in the living room, "Mama" admonishes her older son to watch out for Sonny "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." But the narrator tells us that he did not listen, got married, and went back to war. The next time he comes home is "on a special furlough" for his mother's funeral. The war is still going on. The narrator reminds Sonny that Sonny must "finish school," "And you only got another year." The school that Sonny must finish is obviously high school. Thus, no more than a year or so has passed since the death of the father, who died "in the middle of the war." The United States was in World War II from December of 1941 until August of 1945. "The middle of the war" would have been approximately 1943, or 1942 if you start from the beginning of the war in Europe. Thus, the crucial conversation between Sonny and his brother, in which Sonny first says he wants to be a jazz musician, takes place about 1944. If, on the other hand, the war being fought is the Korean War (June 1950 to July 1953), the conversation takes place about 1952.

When Sonny reveals to his brother that first he wants to be a musician, and then a jazz musician, and then not a jazz musician like Louis Armstrong but one like Charlie Parker, the brother, after asking "Who's this Parker

character," says, "I'll go out and buy all the cat's records right away, all right?" From 1942 to 1944, there was a ban on recordings, at least in part due to a scarcity of materials because of the war. In 1944, Sonny's brother would not have been able to go out and buy new material by Bird (Parker) because there wasn't any. Bird's seminal recordings were made between 1945 and 1948. It is, thus, reasonable to conclude that the war is the Korean.

By 1952, Bird had already revolutionized music. And so when Sonny's brother asks Sonny to name a musician he admires and Sonny says "Bird" and his brother says "Who?," Sonny is justified with his, "Bird! Charlie Parker! Don't they teach you nothing in the goddamn army?" Sonny's brother, at age twenty-four in 1952, can certainly be expected to have heard of Bird. After all, he has heard of Louis Armstrong.

But it is in Sonny's response to Armstrong that one of the keys to the story lies. Sonny's brother admits that, to him, the term "jazz musician" is synonymous with "hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands," and is, thus, "beneath him, somehow." When, from this perspective, jazz musicians are "in a class with ... 'good-time people'," his mentioning of Louis Armstrong needs to be looked at.

From one perspective, Louis Armstrong is one of the true titans of jazz. On the other hand, to many of the Bebop era, Armstrong was considered part of the old guard who needed to be swept out with the new musical revolution, and Armstrong himself was not positively disposed towards Bop. One turning point came in February of 1949 when Armstrong was chosen King of the Zulus for the Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans. To many, he seemed to be donning the minstrel mask of acceptability to the larger white world, and this seemed confirmed when, the same week, he appeared on the cover of *Time* (February 21, 1949). It would be "natural" that Sonny's brother, the future algebra teacher, would have heard of Armstrong, here the symbol of the old conservative, but not of Parker, not only the new and the revolutionary, but the "had been a revolutionary" for seven years. Sonny's response to Armstrong makes this clear:

I suggested, helpfully: "You mean—like Louis Armstrong?" His face closed as though I'd struck him. "No. I'm not talking about none of that old-time, down home crap."

But the differences between Armstrong and Parker represent something much larger. Throughout history, African Americans have been engaged in intramural debate about the nature of identity. Du Bois, of course, put it best when he defined "double-consciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk* and concluded:

One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Du Bois's battles with Booker T. Washington and later with Marcus Garvey are one of the major moments in African American history when this debate was articulated. But there have also been many others; for example, Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany debating whether Africa or America was the place for blacks, and King and Malcolm on the issue of integration. But in order to look at African American culture fully, we cannot limit ourselves to the study of politics and history. As numerous commentators have pointed out, music is the key to much of the African American dispute over this issue of culture; and, therefore, knowledge of it is essential. For example:

The complexities of the collective Black experience have always had their most valid and moving expression in Black music; music is the chief artifact created out of that experience. [Sherley Anne Williams, *Give Birth to Brightness*, 1972]

To reiterate, the key to where the black people have to go is in the music. Our music has always been the most dominant manifestation of what we are and feel.... The best of it has

always operated at the core of our lives, forcing itself upon us as in a ritual. It has always, somehow, represented the collective psyche. ["And Shine Swam On," in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, edited by Michael Schwartz, 1989]

I think it is not fantastic to say that only in music has there been any significant Negro contribution to a *formal* American culture. [Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*, 1963]

The tenor is a rhythm instrument, and the best statements Negroes have made, of what their soul is, have been on tenor saxophone. [Ornette Coleman, quoted in A.B. Spellman's *Black Music: Four Lives (Four Lives in the Bebop Business)*, 1970]

There has never been an equivalent to Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong in Negro writing, and even the best of contemporary literature written by Negroes cannot yet be compared to the fantastic beauty of the music of Charlie Parker. [Baraka, "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,'" in his *Home: Social Essays*, 1966]

Houston Baker has gone as far as suggesting that there is a "blues matrix" at the center of African American culture and that "a vernacular theory" of African American literature can be developed from this idea.

What I am arguing in general is that music is the cornerstone of African American culture; and that, further, Bebop was an absolute key moment. In African American culture, Bebop is as significant as the Harlem Renaissance, and Armstrong and Parker's roles somewhat resemble those of Washington and Du Bois, and Du Bois and Garvey. Armstrong, Washington, and Du Bois (to Garvey) represented the known, the old, and the traditional whose accomplishments were noted but who were considered somewhat passé by the younger, more radical Parker, Du Bois (to Washington), and Garvey.

Musically, Bebop was to a large extent a revolt against swing and the way African American music had been taken over, and diluted, by whites. Perhaps no more emblematic of this is that the aptly named Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman were dubbed respectively "The King of Jazz" and "The King of Swing." As Gary Giddins succinctly puts it [in his *Celebrating Bird: The Triumph of Charlie Parker*, 1987]:

Jazz in the Swing Era was so frequently compromised by chuckleheaded bandleaders, most of them white, who diluted and undermined the triumphs of serious musicians that a new virtuosity was essential. The modernists brandished it like a weapon. They confronted social and musical complacency in a spirit of arrogant romanticism.

Ortiz Walton [in *Music: Black, White, & Blue: A Sociological Survey of the Use and Misuse of Afro-American Music*, 1972] describes the musical revolution as "a major challenge to European standards of musical excellence and the beginning of a conscious black aesthetic in music" because of Bebop's challenge to the European aesthetic emphasis on vibrato. This emphasis produced music that was easily imitable, and thus open to commercialization and cooptation. By revolting against this direction the music had taken and reclaiming it, "Afro-American musicians gained a measure of control over their product, a situation that had not existed since the expansion of the music industry in the Twenties."

Another aspect of this Bop reclamation was a renewed emphasis on the blues. Although some people seem to think there is a dispute over this issue, it is clear from listening to Parker's first session as a leader that "Billie's Bounce" and "Now's the Time" are blues pieces. In his autobiography, Dizzy Gillespie asserts:

Beboppers couldn't destroy the blues without seriously injuring themselves. The modern jazz musicians always remained very close to the blues musician. That was a characteristic of the bopper. [*To Be or Not ... To BOP: Memoirs*, 1979]

To this we could add the following from Baraka:

Bebop also re-established blues as the most important Afro-American form in Negro music by its astonishingly contemporary restatement of the basic blues impulse. The boppers returned to this basic form, reacting against the all but stifling advance artificial melody had made into jazz during the swing era. [*Blues People*]

We could also look at Bebop in terms of the movement from the diatonic to the chromatic, from a more closed to an open form, a movement in the direction of a greater concern with structure, the beginning of jazz postmodernism that would reach its zenith in the work of Ornette Coleman. In "The Poetics of Jazz," Ajay Heble concludes, "Whereas diatonic jazz attempts to posit musical language as a way of thinking about things in the real world, chromaticism begins to foreground *form* rather than *substance*" [see *Textual Practice*, Vol. 2, 1988].

What becomes clear in most of the above is that Bebop must be viewed from two perspectives, the sociopolitical as well as the musical. In Gary Giddins's words, "The Second World War severely altered the texture and tempo of American life, and jazz reflected those changes with greater acuteness by far than the other arts." When Bebop began in the 1940s, America was in a similar position to what it had been in the 1920s. A war had been fought to free the world (again) for democracy; and once again, African Americans had participated and had assumed that this "loyal" participation would result in new rights and new levels of respect. When, once again, this did not appear to be happening, a new militancy developed in the African American community. Bebop was part of this new attitude. The militancy in the African American community that manifested itself in the 1941 strike of black Ford workers and the 1943 Harlem riot also manifested itself in Bebop. As Eric Lott notes:

Brilliantly outside, bebop was intimately if indirectly related to the militancy of its moment. Militancy and music were undergirded by the same social facts; the music attempted to resolve at the level of style what the militancy combatted in the streets. ["Double V, Double-Time: Bebop's Politics of Style," *Callaloo*, Vol. 11, 1988]

Of course, this made Bebop dangerous and threatening to some, who saw it as (or potentially as) "too militant," and perhaps even un-American. And in response to this, Dizzy Gillespie retorts:

Damn right! We refused to accept racism, poverty, or economic exploitation, nor would we live out uncreative humdrum lives merely for the sake of survival. But there was nothing unpatriotic about it. If America wouldn't honor its Constitution and respect us as men, we couldn't give a shit about the American way. And they made it damn near un-American to appreciate our music.

The threat represented by Bebop was not only felt by the white world, but by the assimilationist black middle class as well. Baraka offers these perspectives:

When the moderns, the beboppers, showed up to restore jazz, in some sense, to its original separateness, to drag it outside the mainstream of American culture again, most middle-class Negroes (as most Americans) were stuck; they had passed, for the most part, completely into the Platonic citizenship. The willfully harsh, *anti-assimilationist* sound of bebop fell on deaf or horrified ears, just as it did in white America. [*Blues People*]

Bebop rebelled against the absorption into garbage, monopoly music; it also signified a rebellion by the people who played the music, because it was not just the music that rebelled, as if the music had fallen out of the sky! But even more, dig it, it signified a rebellion rising

out of the masses themselves, since that is the source of social movement—the people themselves! ["War/Philly Blues/Deeper Bop," in *Selected Plays and Prose of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones*, 1979]

What made bop strong is that no matter its pretensions, it was hooked up solidly and directly to the Afro-American blues tradition, and therefore was largely based in the experience and struggle of the black sector of the working class. ["War/"]

In light of this historical context, Sonny's brother's never having heard of Bird is not just a rejection of the music of Bebop; it is also a rejection of the new political direction Bebop was representative of in the African American community.

When the story picks up several years later, some things have changed. Sonny has dropped out of high school, illegally enlisted in the navy and been shipped to Greece, returned to America, and moved to Greenwich Village. Other things have not changed: his brother has become an algebra teacher and a respected member of the black bourgeoisie. After Sonny has been released from prison, he invites his brother to watch him sit in "in a joint in the Village."

What is usually discussed concerning this final scene is that the brother enters Sonny's world, recognizes that he is only a visitor to that world tolerated because of Sonny, that here Sonny is respected and taken care of, and that here is Sonny's true family:

I was introduced to all of them and they were all very polite to me. Yet, it was clear that, for them, I was only Sonny's brother. Here, I was in Sonny's world. Or, rather: his kingdom. Here, it was not even a question that his veins bore royal blood.

When the music Sonny plays is discussed, it is usually done either abstractly, music as the bridge that allows Sonny and his brother to become reunited and Sonny to find his identity, or simply in terms of the blues. It is, of course, totally legitimate to discuss the music in either of these ways. After all, music does function as a bridge between Sonny and his brother; and twice we are reminded in the same page that "what they were playing was the blues," and "Now these are Sonny's blues."

At the climactic moment of the story, when Sonny finally feels so comfortable that his "fingers filled the air with life," he is playing "Am I Blue." It is the first song of the second set, after a tentative performance by Sonny in the first set. Baldwin presents the moment of transition between sets by simply noting, "Then they finished, there was scattered applause, and then, without an instant's warning, Creole started into something else, it was almost sardonic, it was *Am I Blue*."

The word "sardonic," it seems to me, is key here. One of the characteristics of Bebop is taking an old standard and making it new. As Leonard Feather explains:

In recent years it has been an increasingly common practice to take some definite chord sequence of a well-known song (usually a standard old favorite) and build a new melody around it. Since there is no copyright on a chord sequence, the musician is entitled to use this method to create an original composition and copyright it in his own name, regardless of who wrote the first composition that used the same chord pattern. [*Inside Jazz*, 1949]

This practice results in a song with a completely different title. Thus, "Back Home Again in Indiana" becomes Parker's "Donna Lee"; "Honeysuckle Rose" becomes "Scrapple from the Apple"; "I Got Rhythm" becomes "Dexterity," "Confirmation," and "Thriving on a Riff"; "How High the Moon" becomes "Bird Lore"; "Lover Come Back to Me" becomes "Bird Gets the Worm"; and "Cherokee" becomes "Warming Up a Riff" and

"Ko-Ko." But it is also characteristic of Bebop to take the entire song, not simply a chord sequence, and play it in an entirely different way. Thus, for example, Bird's catalogue is filled with versions of tunes like "White Christmas," "Slow Boat to China," "East of the Sun and West of the Moon," "April in Paris," and "Embraceable You." As Baraka notes:

Bebop was a much more open rebellion in the sense that the musicians openly talked of the square, hopeless, corny rubbish put forth by the bourgeoisie. They made fun of it, refused to play it except in a mocking fashion. ["War/"]

Baldwin's use of the word "sardonic," therefore, is clearly intended to tell us that something more is going on than simply playing a standard tune or playing the blues. "Am I Blue" is exactly the type of song that by itself wouldn't do much for anyone, but which could become rich and meaningful after being heated in the crucible of Bebop.

The point of all this is that, through his playing, Sonny becomes "part of the family again," his family with the other musicians; likewise, Sonny's brother also becomes part of the family again, his family with Sonny. But in both cases, Baldwin wants us to view the idea of family through the musical and social revolution of Bebop. Note the brother's language as Sonny plays:

Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and 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.

In the mid to late 1950s, the word "freedom" is obviously a highly charged one. Not only does it speak to the politics of the Civil Rights Movement, but it also points forward to the "Free Jazz" movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, the music of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, and Eric Dolphy. Baldwin's concept of family is, therefore, a highly political one, and one that has cultural implications.

In *Black Talk* [1971], Ben Sidran concludes about Bebop:

The importance of the bop musician was that he had achieved this confrontation—in terms of aesthetics and value structures as well as social action—well before organized legal or political action. Further, unlike the arguments of the NAACP, his music and his hip ethic were not subject to the kind of rationalization and verbal qualification that had all too often compromised out of existence all middle-class Negro gains.

In "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin makes clear that, contrary to many opinions, he is in fact a major fiction writer; and that, Larry Neal notwithstanding, he *has* used to its fullest extent "traditional aspects of Afro-American culture" [See Neal, "The Black Writer's Role, III: James Baldwin," in *Visions of a Liberated Future*]. The implications are clear. Not only does Baldwin's fiction need to be looked at again, but when we are looking at it, writing about it, and teaching it, we need to be conversant with the specific cultural context he is writing in and from. And when we are, new things are there to be seen and heard.

Sonny's Blues Baldwin, James: Further Reading

Criticism

Jones, Harry L. "Style, Form, and Content in the Short Fiction of James Baldwin." In *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Therman B. O'Daniel, pp. 143-50. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press,

1977.

Considers "Sonny's Blues" to be "the most perfectly realized story" in *Going to Meet the Man*.

Levensohn, Alan. "The Artist Must Outwit the Celebrity." *The Christian Science Monitor* 57, No. 301 (18 November 1965): 15.

Positive assessment of *Going to Meet the Man*, with particular emphasis on "Sonny's Blues."

Mosher, Marlene. "Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues.'" *Explicator* 40, No. 4 (Summer 1982): 59.

Notes religious allusions in "Sonny's Blues."

----- "James Baldwin's Blues." *CLA Journal* XXVI, No. 1 (1982): 112-24.

Explores Baldwin's use of the blues as a metaphor in "Sonny's Blues," *The Amen Corner*, *Another Country*, and *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

Additional coverage of Baldwin's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, Vol. 4; *Black Literature Criticism*; *Black Writers*, Vol. 1; *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography*, 1941–1968; *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 1-4 (rev. ed.), 124; *Contemporary Authors Bibliographical Series*, Vol. 1; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vols. 3, 24; *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vols. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 13, 15, 17, 42, 50, 67; *DISCovering Authors*; *Drama Criticism*, Vol. 1; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vols. 2, 7, 33; *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook*, 1987; *Major 20th-Century Writers*; *Something about the Author*, Vols. 9, 54; *Short Story Criticism*, Vol. 10; and *World Literature Criticism*.

Analysis

Style and Technique

Baldwin emphasizes the theme of opposition between the chaotic world and the human need for community with a series of opposing images, especially darkness and light. The narrator repeatedly associates light with the desire to articulate or give form to the needs and passions that arise out of inner darkness. He also opposes light as an idea of order to darkness in the world, the chaos that adults endure, but of which they normally cannot speak to children.

The opposition of light and darkness is often paired with the opposition of inside and outside. Sonny's problem as an artist is that inside himself he feels intensely the storm of human passion; to feel whole and free, he must bring this storm outside by gaining artistic control over it, by articulating it for some listener. Inside is also the location of the family, the place of order that is opposed to outside, the dark and predatory world.

These and other opposing images help to articulate Baldwin's themes of opposition between the meaningless world and the meaning-creating community. The artist, by giving voice to the inner chaos of needs and passions, unites humankind in the face of the outer chaos of random and continuous suffering. The artist helps to create a circle of light in the midst of surrounding darkness.

Analysis: Historical Context

Bebop

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, a new form of jazz music was being developed. The style, called "bebop," "bop," or later, "hardbop," centered on a very complex and abstract type of soloing during familiar tunes. Often in the solo, only the chords of the original melody would remain the same, and the tune would bear no resemblance to more traditional versions. The soloist would also play at blistering speeds. The earliest bebop musicians were trumpet players Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, pianist Thelonious Monk, and saxophonist Charlie Parker. Parker is often credited as the originator of the genre.

Bebop became very controversial at a time when jazz was gaining respectability, and many of the traditional jazz musicians opposed it. Where traditional jazz music and its more popular subform, swing, encouraged audiences to dance and enjoy themselves, bebop focused attention on the soloist and on his technical virtuosity. In this way, it was akin to other forms of modernist art, which exalted difficulty and formal experimentation. The English poet Philip Larkin expressed this association between bebop and modernist art when he condemned what he considered the three main figures of modernism, "Picasso, Pound and Parker," referring to artist Pablo Picasso, poet Ezra Pound, and musician Charlie Parker. Bebop was intellectualized where jazz and swing were pleasant and sensual, and the emotions that bebop expressed were often dark and brooding.

Contributing to bebop's somewhat dangerous and seamy reputation were the highly publicized drug problems of many of bebop's central figures. Charlie Parker, Art Pepper, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and many other important bebop innovators suffered from addictions to drugs; heroin was the most common drug in the jazz world. Most of bebop's important figures lived in New York City by the late 1940s, playing clubs in Greenwich Village and on 52nd Street where heroin was easy to find. By the 1950s, bebop and heroin were virtually synonymous.

In Baldwin's story, the character of Sonny represents bebop in both its positive and negative aspects. The brother thinks of jazz as "clowning around on bandstands," while for Sonny music is deadly serious, life itself. When the brother finally does go to see Sonny play, he begins to understand what bebop is all about. The "clowning" that he previously felt was the essence of jazz is nowhere to be found, and in its place there is the blues. The deep emotional expression of the song Sonny plays—"Am I Blue"—connects with Sonny's brother. "He hit something in me, myself."

Race in New York City

James Baldwin grew up in New York City and therefore was spared the brutal racial oppression of the South in the 1930s and 1940s. Baldwin's neighborhood, Harlem, had by the 1920s become a haven for blacks coming north from Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia. Although the North did not have the racist Jim Crow laws that characterized the South, it was by no means a land of equality. Blacks in the North suffered from limited educational and economic opportunities. They were the "last hired and the first fired" for most jobs. Harlem was often a rude shock to poor blacks fleeing the South. Expecting a friendly reception from a proudly black city, they were often greeted by crime, poverty, and the infamous New York attitude that disdains newcomers and country people.

However difficult life was in Harlem, though, it was better than life, in the South. For that reason many of the leading lights of African-American culture congregated there, and in the 1920s the neighborhood enjoyed a cultural high point called the "Harlem Renaissance." Writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, musicians such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and many other artistic and intellectual figures made Harlem and New York City a haven for culture.

Baldwin was born into this world, where extreme poverty and deprivation were often overshadowed by the achievements of a few of the neighborhood's inhabitants. "You see, there were two Harlems," Baldwin said in 1969. "There were those who lived in Sugar Hill and there was the Hollow, where we lived. There was a great divide between the black people on the hill and us. I was just a raggedy, funky black shoeshine boy and was afraid of the people on the Hill, who, for their part, didn't want to have anything to do with me."

Although New York was often difficult and daunting, throughout his life Baldwin continued to feel most at home in Harlem. The city of New York, with its extremes, retained a central importance in Baldwin's work until his death. In Harlem, he said in 1989, "people know what I know, and we can talk and laugh, and it would never occur to anybody to say what we all know."

Analysis: Literary Style

Narration and Point of View

"Sonny's Blues" chronicles the relationship between two brothers at various points in their lives. Baldwin arranges the story's events to show the building of an understanding between the two brothers. Sonny's brother, who is never named in the story, narrates "Sonny's Blues." Although the story focuses on the events of Sonny's life, the fact that readers hear his brother's reactions to and feelings about Sonny's actions broadens the scope of the story to include the brother's life as well. Baldwin uses this double focus to bring out one of his most important themes: the growing understanding between estranged brothers.

Setting

The story is set in New York City, although at one point Sonny speaks in a letter from his prison cell upstate. Baldwin varies the time in which the story is set. By blending the time periods together with little separation or even clear notice, Baldwin establishes a sense of duration. Sonny's brother narrates the important events of Sonny's life as if they had happened at the same time. The fact that the events all share a sense of suffering or hardship or alienation hammers home the realization—which Sonny's brother finally arrives at in the jazz club—that suffering has been the dominant mode of Sonny's life. Baldwin arranges the story's events thematically—as opposed to arranging them chronologically—to emphasize their content, instead of their sequence or causality.

Catharsis

In literature "catharsis" refers to the outlet given the audience's emotions at the end of a story. In "Sonny's Blues," the cathartic moment occurs in the jazz club, when both Sonny's brother and the reader watch Sonny overcome, for a moment, the troubles of the world through his music. The growing tension in the story is the reader's and the narrator's gradual understanding of Sonny and the burden he bears. The catharsis Baldwin grants both the reader and the narrator is seeing Sonny find a way to defuse his suffering. In this catharsis, the reader also watches Sonny's own catharsis, as he uses his music as an outlet for his blues.

Analysis: Literary Techniques

For most of the story, Baldwin stays within the conventions governing the genre of social realism. The narrative breaks dramatically, however, in the closing scene at the jazz club: as the narrator tires to explain in words the powerful hold that the music has over him, the language becomes richer, the metaphors more extravagant and complex, and the evocations more elusive.

Sonny himself could not tell his own story so thoughtfully: by filtering his life through the eyes of another, Baldwin is able to offer a point of view that is not corrupted by self-pity or sentimental self-righteous indignation. The reader, moreover, may recognize that even though this is a story about Sonny and his transformation, the narrator, too, undergoes significant changes as he comes to embrace Sonny's chosen

profession.

Perhaps most crucially, though, Baldwin disrupts the chronology of Sonny's story: the narrative opens with the news of Sonny's arrest, moves forward to Grace's death and Sonny's release, moves backward to chronicle Sonny's slide into addiction and the deaths of their uncle and then their mother before concluding in the present moment of the nightclub scene. By refusing to present the events of the narrative in a sequential manner, Baldwin offers a strong commentary on the need to actively reclaim a past, and to work towards reconstructing a history for oneself.

Analysis: Ideas for Group Discussions

For a short story that focuses on just one central character, "Sonny's Blues" invites a remarkably wide-ranging set of questions regarding its form and content.

1. Music, and specifically the history of African American music, is an important subject in this story. Sonny plays jazz, of course, but the title also refers to the musical genre of the blues. The story opens with the narrator listening to the sound of R&B filtering through the open door of a barroom, and later he and Sonny stop to listen to gospel revival on a street corner. One might try to trace the connections between these styles of music and how they relate to the African American experience.
2. Sonny's story is not told in a linear, chronological sequence. The tale begins with his arrest and moves through a series of flashbacks before ending up in the present at Sonny's performance. Why would Baldwin choose to disrupt the chronology in this manner? How would the impact of the story differ had Baldwin began with the death of the brothers' uncle? How might Baldwin be commenting upon the difficulty of presenting history and clear narratives of history?
3. The story of Grace, the narrator's daughter who dies of polio, occupies just a few paragraphs in this story, and yet her tragedy can be said to be extremely important to the themes of suffering, innocence, and guilt. How does her death impact the narrator's relationship with his brother?
4. The ending seems to suggest that Sonny has managed to escape his drug problems, but this is never explicitly stated. Are we to imagine that Sonny's problems are behind him now? Or is it possible that he could return to the life he lived before? Why might Baldwin leave this ambiguity in the text?
5. Even though Baldwin's story is fixed in a particular time and place, to what extent does the story work in transhistorical terms? That is, many of the issues he describes are still problems in inner urban communities, and music is still seen by many as a "ticket to freedom." Can you imagine an updated telling of this tale? What would it look like?
6. How might the story be different if told by Sonny instead of the narrator? What would be gained, and lost, by shifting the perspective in this way?
7. Baldwin suggests that one reason many people take drugs is that it offers them an escape from an otherwise painful reality. But he also describes music, and the reason for playing music, in similar language. In what ways are these escapes similar? How do they differ?

Analysis: Social Concerns

As is the case with many of Baldwin's more than twenty works of fiction and non-fiction, the perceived need to escape from a threatening and oppressive environment is a central concern in this tale of an aspiring jazz

pianist growing up on the "vivid killing streets" of Harlem in the late 1950s. Narrated by his unnamed older brother through the use of multiple and extended flashbacks, the story chronicles Sonny's life from his return to New York after a stint in the Navy to his fall into addiction, his arrest for peddling heroin, and his appearance on the stage of a downtown nightclub. Sonny's downfall and subsequent redemption are set against larger social issues of racism, poverty, drug abuse, and crime: Baldwin suggests that these problems are endemic in a community unable to offer other, more positive and liberating outlets to its denizens.

The narrator recognizes that his brother's self-destructive proclivities are not unique, but rather representative of an entire generation of young aimless black men who "were growing up in a rush" and "whose heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage." This rage gets channeled into solipsistic and nihilistic practices, and the implication is that Sonny's retreat from the world around him is engendered by a whole host of external forces which prevent social mobility.

While racism is not explicitly identified as the primary source for Sonny's feelings of alienation, impotence and isolation, a story told by the narrator about the death of their uncle at the hands of a group of drunken white boys illustrates how a perception of racism governs these brothers' view of the world they inhabit. Racial strife is subordinated in this text even as it provides the ground upon which the more visible social problems of drug abuse and urban blight are witnessed daily by those living in Harlem's housing projects.

What comes through most forcefully in the story, however, is the idea that one may break free of the shackles of an oppressive society by channeling anger and pain through creative outlets and in the process recognize the importance of forging familial and communal bonds.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1950s: Jazz innovators, such as Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, Max Roach, and Bud Powell either live in or spend a great deal of time playing in New York City. Clubs such as the Village Vanguard and Birdland are world-famous for their revolutionary jazz offerings.

Today: After a long period of drought, bebop-influenced jazz (now viewed as "traditional") is again popular in New York City. Players such as Joshua Redman and Roy Ayres, known as "Young Lions," bring the old sounds back to the old clubs like the Vanguard and the Blue Note, while jazzman Wynton Marsalis has an office at Lincoln Center, the epitome of musical classicism.

1950s: Heroin is an underground drug, synonymous with jazzmen, beatniks and low-lives. Although many artists, musicians, and urban dwellers are addicted to the drug, the general population is primarily unaware of its existence.

Today: Heroin use is surging among young people after decades of unpopularity. Musician Kurt Cobain of the group Nirvana kills himself in 1994 after battling unsuccessfully with a heroin addiction.

1957: In Little Rock, Arkansas, federal troops are needed to integrate Central High School after Arkansas governor Orval Faubus refuses to let black children enter the building.

1997: President and former Arkansas governor Bill Clinton seeks to integrate his White House Cabinet, hoping to make his closest group of advisers "look more like America."

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

Read about the development of bebop jazz music in the 1940s. Who were some of the important figures? How was bebop different from traditional jazz? Why was it controversial?

How were black people treated in Northern cities in the 1940s and 1950s? How did daily life in the North differ from daily life in the South for a working-class black family? Was Sonny's brother, with his middle-class life, an exception?

Investigate the role of the church in Harlem today. What services does the church provide? How do the roles of religious institutions in neighborhoods like Harlem differ from their roles in other parts of the city?

Analysis: Literary Precedents

When asked in interviews about his formative influences and literary forebears, Baldwin has claimed a debt to many nineteenth and twentieth-century authors—Dickens, Dostoyevsky, and Faulkner among them. Certainly the social issues which concerned the realist writers of the past century—particularly the degradations faced by the urban poor and the oppressive environment which inhibits creative and intellectual growth—resonate in Baldwin's work, while Faulkner's representations of race relations, if not necessarily his modernist formal techniques, have informed Baldwin's sensibilities.

Baldwin's work has obvious affiliations with Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son*, a text which, like "Sonny's Blues," chronicles the rage of a young black man caught up in a hostile urban landscape. Despite his many reservations about the novel, Baldwin saw himself as participating in a tradition of which Wright is a central figure, as is evident from the title of his 1955 collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*. Baldwin has also talked at length about Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and the humiliations and degradations faced by Ellison's black characters in this text find a renewed expression in "Sonny's Blues."

Analysis: Related Titles

As one story among eight in *Going to Meet the Man*, "Sonny's Blues" gains depth and coherence when read against the others in the collection. The title story in particular, which recounts through a series of flashbacks the emotional core of a sadistic white Southern sheriff who brutalizes his black prisoners during the Civil Rights movement, offers a compelling counterpoint to the frustrations and anger felt by of Sonny and his brother.

Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, was published just four years before "Sonny's Blues," and in this story (which also incorporates many autobiographical elements of Baldwin's life) a young man's initiation into adulthood is marked by religious, racial, and familial strife. *Another Country*, written in the early sixties, has as one central character, Rufus Scott, a disillusioned jazz drummer whose experiences of racial prejudice and feelings of alienation from family and society can be read productively against the character of Sonny.

For an important political and historical gloss on "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin's personal essays and cultural criticism provide much insight. In *Notes of a Native Son* and in particular the early essay "The Harlem Ghetto," Baldwin discusses what it is to be a black man in America at mid-century. *The Fire Next Time*, perhaps his more celebrated collection of essays, claims in part that concepts of identity based only on skin color are ultimately destructive, and his arguments regarding this country's racial wounds are infused with a profound humanism.

Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

Go Tell it on the Mountain, Baldwin's landmark novel about the condition of African Americans in the United States.

Notes of a Native Son, Baldwin's highly regarded collection of essays which discuss race issues.

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison is another landmark novel about the position of blacks in American society.

Mexico City Blues (1959) by Jack Kerouac is a song-like novel written in the style of jazz compositions. Kerouac was a leader of the Beat Movement in literature, a group of New York City writers in the 1940s and 1950s who were influenced by the milieu of Harlem, bebop jazz music, blues, and drugs.

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