

Example of research paper on sonnys blues by james baldwin

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A Critical Analysis

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" (1965) is one of his best known stories, and it continues to attract critical attention and to attract new readers.

Written during the Civil Rights Campaign of the 1960s, Baldwin eschews his habitual preoccupations with homosexuality and inter-racial relationships to write a moving story of two brothers. Clark (1994) argues that the story "meticulously interrogates and dismantles the superficial, socially imposed aspects of men's relationships precisely because the story is so uniquely asexual." - unique in Baldwin's work, he means. Famously, Baldwin uses the music of the blues and jazz as a metaphor for the African American experience in the USA. Through a mixture of reflection on the past and a recognition of his own heritage the narrator changes by the end of the story which concludes with a moment of epiphany and reconciliation between the two brothers through music.

The story begins ominously with the narrator hearing and news second-hand from the newspapers:

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. 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. (1774).

This is a masterful and intriguing opening. Baldwin delays telling us what has happened and who the person is in relation to the narrator. The name "Sonny" is not mentioned until the second paragraph, and his crime not until

the end of the third paragraph - " peddling and using heroin." (1775).

Baldwin does not reveal that Sonny and the narrator are brothers until the fourth paragraph. Given the opening three paragraphs the reader might expect the story to go one of two ways, Lilienfield suggests: it might be a story of a lost cause, the downward descent into doom reminiscent of other African-American protagonists (such as Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*) or we might expect a story of redemption in which, Lilienfield posits, the younger brother is " rehabilitated into a version of his brother, the narrator." (176). It is a mark of Baldwin's originality that he confounds the reader's expectations and ends the story in a new and interesting way.

Much criticism of the story has focused on Sonny - after all, he is named in the title and most of the action and interest centers on him. However, the opening is important to remember because in many ways the narrator in this story is just as important as his wayward brother. According to Lilienfield, the narrator is filled with fear and denial and he is " associated from the outset with their values of the dominant American culture." (176). The narrator goes to work every day on the subway; he reads the newspaper; he is as horrified as the reader might be to hear of heroin dealing and its use. His fear in the opening is clear - " I was scared, scared for Sonny," - as is his denial - " It was not to be believed and I kept telling myself that, as I walked from the subway station to the high school." However, Lilienfield argues that " though the reader might be confident that the addict, Sonny, should be devalued, Baldwin suggests that the narrator's attitude is very limited and deeply flawed." (178). As we begin reading the story, we might feel, along with

Clark that Sonny is “ the prototypical drug-addicted jazz artist of the 1950s” (34), and it is true that the narrator sees him that way at the start of the story. Clark also says that the two brothers’ lives are “ mirror opposites”: the narrator is a middle class, conformist teacher of Math and Sonny is a heroin addict, a free spirit who finds himself in music. At the start of the story the narrator clearly disapproves of his brother’s behavior and, as Shurman (118) writes, he “ has little patience for his students, the people in the street and his own brother who does not possess his discipline and sense of responsibility.” After their mother’s funeral when Sonny confesses to the narrator that he wants to play jazz, the narrator (1786) comments: Well, the word had never sounded so heavy, so real, as it sounded that afternoon in Sonny’s mouth 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 a dance floor I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called “ good-time people.” But this story is less about Sonny than it is about the narrator and, as Reilly (149) asserts, “ The fundamental movement of “ Sonny’s Blues” represents the accommodation of the first person narrator’s consciousness to the meaning of his younger brother’s way of life.” In other words, the narrator is transformed by the end of the story and he becomes reconciled to his brother and his brother's way of life. This is partly because, to borrow, Baldwin’s phrase from the end of his opening paragraph, the narrator is “ trapped in the darkness” - trapped as an African American in a white, racist society; trapped in the conventions of middle class life to which he aspires; trapped in his stereotypical assumptions about jazz musicians; trapped in a

place where he isolated from his own people and his own culture. His pursuit of a career as a high school teacher is just another way of coping with the ghetto; Sonny has chosen jazz and heroin. As Jimoh (2005) insists " Sonny resists by rejecting the things that are valued by the dominant society." But the narrator must change before he can be reconciled with his brother.

Throughout the story music is a way of communicating, just as the Blues and jazz are used as a metaphor for the black experience in the United States. However, somewhat ironically, elsewhere in the story, communication is not good: music allows hidden feelings to be revealed, and, once revealed, not accepted, but at least acknowledged and grieved over. The narrator reveals to Sony that their mother has told him that their father's own life was dominated by the murder of his own brother by a gang of drunken whites in a car who deliberately ran his brother over. The fate of the narrator's and Sonny's uncle is important in three ways: their mother tells the narrator that their father never ever talked about it, but that he spent his whole life thinking about it. His mother told the narrator:

He never mentioned it because I never let him mention it before you children. Your Daddy was like a crazy man that night and for many a night thereafter your Daddy never did really get right again. Till the day he died he weren't sure but that every white man he saw was the man that killed his brother." (1785).

Clark (34) sees this as evidence of Baldwin's presentation of " black men's pain and inability to connect." And it is certainly true that not mentioning it has not helped him come to terms with his brother's death, and in the story

the narrator and Sonny become closer through talking and being open with each other. According to their mother, their father had never seen " anything as dark as that road after the lights of that car had gone away," and we might remember the " darkness which roared outside" the subway car at the start of the story. The darkness represents sorrow we feel for family members, the oblivion to which we all must go, but also symbolizes the way black Americans are treated in an unfair society. Baldwin uses this image of darkness when the narrator recalls being a child and listening to the conversations of adults as the afternoon slowly turns to evening, writing

The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frightens the child obscurely. He hopes the hand that strokes his forehead will will never stop - will never die. He hopes 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.

This is a lament for the passing of time, the growth from childhood to adulthood, human mortality and also the black experience in the USA, as Baldwin implies in the next paragraph: " The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure." (1783). The narrator has attempted, as it were , to avoid his uncle's fate by conforming; Sony has attempted to escape by cutting himself off from white society through music and drugs: they face the same problem, although it takes the whole story for the narrator to acknowledge it and accept it.

Secondly, the narrator is very similar to his father: he prefers not to talk

about his daughter's death from polio, but it is clearly something that haunts him and adds to his sense of anger. Thirdly, the narrator and Sony are clearly intended to be parallels to their father and his brother, with their uncle, like Sonny, being the musician: their father's memory of the sound of the wood and the strings breaking as the car ran them over is especially vivid, and we are told that the brothers' uncle loved to perform on Saturday nights. One of Baldwin's messages in this story is that we must communicate with each other if we are to understand each other and be reconciled where differences exist. In this sense, the story's publication date of 1965 is especially relevant, coming as it did at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, and suggesting, despite the fact that all the story's characters are black, that dialogue leads to reconciliation. When they start to talk to each other as adults, the narrator is sceptical about Sonny's desire to be a musician because, the story suggests, he is too narrow-minded and conventional, and the narrator's act of talking with Sonny - and thereby remembering the murder of his uncle and the death of his daughter allow him to growing awareness and maturity. During Sonny's time in prison they hardly communicate, but it is significant that the narrator is moved to write to his brother after his daughter Grace has died.

I may have written Sonny the very day that little Grace was buried. I was sitting in the living room in the dark, by myself, and I suddenly thought of Sonny. My trouble made his real. (1791-2).

We might note Baldwin's use of the imagery of the "dark" again. The narrator has started the process which will lead to his reconciliation with his brother at the end of the story. It is not actually the act of remembering that

is important but the act of expressing it in words. Sonny can express himself through music, but the narrator must use words - and it works! He grows in emotional maturity and the end of the story is possible.

It could be argued that the narrator is ostracized not only from his brother (at the start of the story it is clear that they have not spoken or seen each other for over a year), but also from his black heritage. In the story the Blues, Miller (86) argues, are a "metaphor for African American liberation." Liberation because through music African Americans can excel and celebrate their heritage, but also liberation because through the music they can express their deepest fears and desires - fears prompted by a racist society and desires denied by that same society. It is significant that the narrator at the start of the story is hostile to the Blues and to jazz. The music is also a coping mechanism: Loflin (143) argues that "music, especially soul and jazz, is what helps people, in Sonny's words, simply "to stand it, to be able to make it at all on any level. It is a strategy for survival." And as such a strategy it is more fulfilling than the narrator's job as a Math teacher. Reilly (150) argues that

the meaning of the Blues repairs the relationship between the two men who have chosen different ways to cope with the menacing ghetto environment, and their reconciliation through the medium of this Afro-American musical form extends the meaning of individual's blues until it becomes a metaphor for the black community.

Like the darkness, the Blues are blues for all of life's vicissitudes - the death of daughters, the estrangement of brothers - but are given a particularly sorrowful twist as part of the African American heritage.

Another key moment in the narrator's development is when he looks out of the window one Saturday afternoon and observes a street revival meeting. He describes (1793) the hymns and the giving of testimony, and feels like the singers are transformed by their art:

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 their sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last.

Baldwin is careful not to over-sentimentalize this moment - Sonny who has been listening in the street dismisses it as " a terrible song" - but there is something redemptive about it. Hardy (57) asserts that, " The reality that hovers just beyond sight of these soulful singers is the deep suffering necessary to produce a music and art that is truly compelling."

All the changes in the narrator prepare us for the final, uplifting scene in the jazz club. The narrator makes a show of going very reluctantly, as if only to support his brother, but Baldwin's presentation of his reaction to Sonny's playing and his observation of the audience who listen to Sonny's piano suggest that music can be a redemptive force. The narrator (1800) admits that " 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." This ending is triumphant and celebratory and looks forward to freedom. Clark (34) claims that " Baldwin breaks new ground because he refuses to portray black male as long-suffering, perpetually victimized by and longing

for white society." Sonny, who began the story as a heroin-riddled cliché, ends a transforming agent of freedom; the narrator who began the story "trapped in the darkness", has seen the light.

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