

# Blue as a tool for narrative development



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Story is based on common themes that explores suffering experienced by a black family predominantly two brothers as they struggle through individualism, lack education, drug addiction and imprisonment. It describes the struggle of two brothers separated and caught in the entanglements of time, space, and ideals. The narrator explains how Harlem was a very ruff neighborhood to live in and to raise a family, due to the environment he was living in Sonny lacked education and begin to do drugs but uses jazz music as an outlet.

This piece of literature introduces suffering experienced by a black family predominantly two brothers which is analyzed in the story.

Nevertheless, many critical views argue that Baldwin has figuratively used the blues in development of his narrative. The themes have been brought out in the narrative as bebop. Baldwin may have used the element of the blues to emphasize the essence of togetherness in the society. Therefore, it would be correct to argue that Baldwin uses the blues idea in his work because of the structure, the content, the discussion of the theme of individualism and the use of jazz reference in the final section of the story.

The setting in this story is one many can relate to, riding home on a train, bus, taxi cab or even walking home reading the newspaper only to discover a situation or tragedy hit home. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and on my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside. (Baldwin 251) It puts you in a place of discomfort and a feeling of unease. The narrator experiences combat fatigue hearing the news of his baby brother by the name of Sonny

being arrested for using and selling drugs in the street of Harlem. This man was so afraid for his brother that he barely could keep it together while teaching his math class. A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. (Baldwin 251) The narrator was overwhelmed by the news that he had read in the newsprint this was too much for him to receive into his spirit early in the morning, I was in disbelief he couldn't digest what was going on mentally. This incident reminds the narrator of growing up with his brother in Harlem and how things were on the streets and in their own neighborhood.

Based on the structure of the narrative, it is apparent that the Baldwin uses the format of blues music in the discussion of his themes. They were filled with rage (Baldwin 257). The blues are associated with low spirits which have been clearly brought out in Baldwin's story. The narrator is not comfortable with his selfish life. As it can be seen in the story, he prefers leading respectable and safe life. His brother on the other side leads an opposite lifestyle, he is more into substance abuse. Perhaps it's possible then to see Baldwin's title as an invitation to question the very sense of blues (Sherard 1). This statement by Sherard supports the fact that the blues structure is used in the Sonny's Blues story. The title might be focusing on how Sonny uses the blues in the discovering himself.

Baldwin has used the structure of the blues in the development of his narrative. I read about it on the paper, in the subway on my way to work. I read it, and I could not believe it, and read it again. (Baldwin 251). As mentioned earlier, the blues are synonymous with low spirits. It is evident from the above statement that the narrator of the story was in such a low

mood. The narrator is not happy with his brother who has been engaging in illegal activities. According to Sherard, Baldwin's description of the motion inside the subway car conveys the rhythm of change (2). The description of the subway is a common element brought about in the blues. For years the railway has been used in jazz music to symbolize African Americans. Therefore, it would be correct to argue that the blues structure has been used in the *Sonny's Blues* story.

The blues take into account the form and the content of the music, which is also evident in the *Sonny's Blues* narrative. You don't know how much I needed to hear from you (Baldwin 254). The author of the narrative aims at bringing out the theme of brotherhood in the story. It is for this reason that he portrays the narrator as a concerned person who is anxious about his brother's behavior (Chapter 9). Notably, the blues motif has always been used to portray the actual status of the society. So it is with the history of jazz, and also in the history of the families described in this narrative. (Lee 286). As mentioned earlier, the blues are based on the form and the content. Therefore, Baldwin has focused on the elaboration of the history of jazz music to elaborate the actual state of the African American society.

The author of the narrative has also used the jazz motif to bring out the theme of individualism. Well, look, Sonny, I'm sorry, don't get mad name somebody you know, a jazz musician you admire (Baldwin 259). Sonny is a pianist who likes to play jazz a genre associated

with individuality. Being competent in the area depends on a person's capability to improve their skills. It all depends on an individual's hard work.

The author of the story has included this element in the narrative to emphasize on individualism in the society. Of course, improvisation "players having the freedom to be composers, of solos or of styles" drives individual pieces as well as the history of jazz players having the freedom to be composers (Lee 286). As it can be seen in this statement, jazz players have the freedom of composing their own songs according to their interest. Therefore, it would be correct to ascertain that Baldwin incorporates an element of jazz players in his narrative to focus on the theme of individualism.

In the final section of the story, Baldwin uses jazz references to focus on the theme of the struggles of life. ? He and the piano stammered, started one way, panicked, marked time, started again; they seemed to have found a direction, panicked again got stuck (Baldwin 139). Based on the above statement, Baldwin brings jazz references that motivate Sonny to find himself through the art of music. The struggles of life that Sonny goes through while trying to find himself is compared to the difficult process of learning how to play the piano. The blues influences bebop at another, more explicitly emotional level in Sonny's Blues. (Claborn 89). Similarly, Claborn still argues that the blue played a significant role in Africa American society. Musicians were able to express themselves through music. The same way Baldwin does in his narrative. He tries to bring out the actual status of the African American society.

From a critical review, it is clear that Baldwin's uses of the blues in the development of his content and structure supports the thesis statement of this paper. In the story, the author has included musicians such as Charlie

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Parker and Louis Armstrong to refer to the characters in the narrative. Bird! Charlie Parker! Don't they teach you anything in the goddamn army?

(Baldwin 259). The inclusion of jazz artists in the story implies that the author was more inclined on the ideas applied in the blues in his narrative. According to Claborn This story of the doomed double for Robert Johnson, which fulfills the myth of the self-destructive blues musician speeding towards death as mentioned earlier, the author uses the life history of jazz musicians to elaborate on the problem facing the African American society.

Although Baldwin uses the blues to support his themes in the story, some structural flaws in the narrative might impel readers to question his understanding of the blues motif. Bird! Charlie Parker! Don't they teach you anything on the goddamn army? (Baldwin 259). This statement would impel readers to question whether musicians are related to the army. Sonny argument on military lessons learned from Charlie Parker seems to be out of place. Based on this point of view, it would be correct to argue that the use of the blues ideas in Baldwin's narrative is not effective. It does not help the support of the themes of the story.

In summary, it is evident from the above argumentation that Baldwin uses the blue in the development of his narrative. The blues element can be seen from the structure, the contents, elaboration of themes such as individualism and the use of jazz reference in the final sections of the story. Despite the opposing views, it is clear from the narrative that the author based his story on the blues. This is a common genre used by African Americans to express their problems in the community.