

## Reading the Structures of "Sonny's Blues"

Hugh Nicoll

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" (1957) is a widely anthologized short story which has received considerable critical attention. Critics generally read the story as an expression of the resolution of the central conflict, the estrangement of the unnamed narrator from his younger brother, Sonny, a jazz musician and heroin addict. Byerman (1982), however, offered a persuasive reading focusing on the aesthetic structures and fundamental ambiguities of the narrative. This essay discusses Werner's concept of the *gospel impulse* (1989) in Baldwin's writing in relation to the aesthetics and ambiguities of "Sonny's Blues" in the context of the 1940s and 50s bebop revolution in modern jazz.

**Key Words** : James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues", African American literature, jazz impulse in American literature

*When you hear music, after it's over, it's gone in the air. You can never capture it again.*

Eric Dolphy, "Last Date"

### Introduction

Craig Hansen Werner opens his 1989 essay "James Baldwin: Politics and the Gospel Influence" by observing that Baldwin had, by the time of his death "been effectively marginalized" as an intellectual influence. Werner argues that Baldwin's faith in salvation was the chief cause of his falling into intellectual disfavor (212-213). There is, however, ample evidence that Baldwin still has the power to inspire and influence both ordinary readers and critics alike. The Library of America published Baldwin's collected works in two volumes in 1998, and the MLA bibliographies for 1999 and 2000 list 32 and 24 entries respectively. Baldwin's 1957 story, "Sonny's Blues," remains a popular title in anthologies of American literature, and in what must be described as an act of homage, the collected stories, *Going to Meet the Man*, are proudly claimed as the

inspiration behind the 2002 *JazzReach* album of the same name by the Metta Quintet. The question as to whether the form of this attention is conducive to productive new readings of Baldwin's most popular short story, "Sonny's Blues," is one of the questions this essay seeks to discuss. This essay also seeks to extend the discussion of the ambiguities of "Sonny's Blues" charted by Keith Byerman in his important 1982 article, and to explore the social and musical contexts for the narrative's structural and thematic puzzles.

Werner's concept of the *gospel impulse*, is, at least superficially, in the celebratory mode of critics who read "Sonny's Blues" as achieving reconciliation between the narrator with his younger brother Sonny. He locates this impulse in the inseparability of the political and the aesthetic, a practice of being in the world identified as natively African American at least since W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Werner identifies this gospel impulse as both tool and emblem of writers and musicians "seeking to transcend" the perceived "dichotomies" between the political and aesthetic in the opposing versions of the avant-garde that emerged at the turn of the century and set the stage for the developments of modernism. In the African American community, Werner argues, noting the "relative autonomy of black musicians (as opposed to writers)" this dialectic of modernism has been articulated primarily in African American music, citing the importance ascribed to music as a cultural force by such writers as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison (218). In the sections that follow, I will discuss what I will call the jazz structures of "Sonny's Blues" and the challenges the narrative poses for readers.

Critics have discussed "Sonny's Blues" from several perspectives – emphasizing the figure of the musician, the blues as a primary theme, and Baldwin's depiction of the African-American community – but most readings offer New Critical "close readings" of the text and are in general agreement that "it resolves its central conflict": the troubled relationship between the narrator and his jazz musician younger brother. Only Byerman, cited above, sees "underlying ambiguity" as its primary conundrum. The story is, like the bebop jazz scene it represents and comments on, "at once very complicated and very simple" ("Sonny's Blues" 832); repeat readings simultaneously reward and challenge. Its language is rich in musicality and the narrative addresses identity, the nature of art and the artistic life, the costs of racism, and the cultural importance of music in the African

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American community. In extending Byerman's discussion of its fundamental ironies, I will seek to show that "Sonny's Blues" is first of all a bebop wail of promise *and* pain, rooted in its setting, and finally, that full readings are only possible for readers willing to entertain multiple and conflicting perspectives.

### Structures

The structural aspects of "Sonny's Blues" may be approached in several ways: first, through the organizing metaphors of the text; second, in terms of space and time, in the settings and pace of the story; and, finally, as "a study of the nature and relationship of art and language" (Byerman 198). Jones' observation that Baldwin's short stories are ruminative, "not notable for their presentation of action" (143), serves to confirm the main point Byerman makes in concluding his discussion of the story's fundamental ambiguity: that the paradox of the story's simultaneous transparency and opacity must be understood as a dialectic in which there is "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" (203). This is, in essence, a veiling of several parallel ironies: "the near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" of the blues (*Shadow* 78); the nightmare challenges of black self-discovery in white supremacist America; and, the final aching irony for a writer—the possibility "that the price a Negro pays for becoming articulate is to find himself, at length, with nothing to be articulate about" (*Native Son* 9). Let us consider these several features in greater detail.

The primary and most obvious metaphors in the story are song, specifically the blues song of the title, and title character Sonny. Werner, in his positive reading of the brothers' (and through music, the community's) reconciliation, calls it "a classic expression of the blues and jazz impulses" (219). Similarly, though emphasizing Baldwin's frequent use of the musician figure to embody "alienation and estrangement", Williams (1972) also declares "Music... the medium through which the musician achieves enough understanding and strength to deal with the past and present hurt" (147). As has been frequently observed, this "past and present hurt" is both private and public, and reflects the primary device of the narrative, the juxtaposition of figurative and abstract opposites, a characteristic, according to Newman ("Lessons"), that Baldwin shares with Henry James. These dualities include self and other, darkness and light, windows and

television, the “whiteness” of the narrator’s middle-class life and Sonny’s “authentic” blackness, chaos and control, etc. These metaphoric structures are articulated in their spatial and temporal domains.

Scruggs, (1993) describes “Sonny’s Blues” as a particularly successful treatment of the twinned themes “of terror based on ‘the fact of color’...” (146) and black people’s use of “small, intimate spaces” (147) as places for self-expression and sharing “within the walls of the terrifying city.” (146). In “Sonny’s Blues” the most significant of these intimate spaces are :

- the living room where the narrator as a child listened to family elders swap stories ;
- the taxi taking Sonny and his brother home to Harlem ;
- “home” as a place where intimate stories are shared ;
  - narrator and his mother (their final meeting) ;
  - narrator and Sonny in the narrator’s apartment ;
- the jazz club of the final scenes.

Readers enter most of these enclosed spaces through the narrative’s flashbacks, making them, in a sense, doubly enclosed – separate physical settings, at one remove from the present of narrative time. And it is in these settings, according to Jones, that Baldwin most commonly introduces “the unstructured aesthetic, a beautiful passage set down in the midst of narrative as an end in itself and for the conative impact it has on the reader” (147-148). This is akin to a riff, often on a quoted (*sampled* in more contemporary jargon) passage from a pop tune, folk, or gospel melody, in a bebop jazz improvisation – a theme which I will discuss below, and at greater length toward the conclusion of this paper.

In most cases, it is in these passages that Baldwin’s prose achieves its most musical effects, and the mixed transparency and opacity of the text signals, though perhaps “only on the lower frequencies” to borrow a phrase from Ellison, the enigmatic relations of language and meanings. In the enclosed space of the subway car in the opening paragraph, the overtly public space of a New York rush hour commute becomes a private space, the narrator alone with his thoughts.

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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 (831).

This short paragraph of only seventy-nine words—though less celebrated than the extended meditations on music, history, consciousness, and the difficulties of being an artist in the concluding nightclub scene—is indicative of the music of Baldwin’s language. It also introduces the fundamental oppositions between inner (private) and outer (public) spaces, the menace inherent in the external environment, light and darkness, while establishing the narrator’s characteristic voice: controlled and grammatically precise. The controlled effect is achieved with a rhythm akin to the opening bars of a bebop tune. It is short and fast, as if starting in the middle of the song, and assuming, or, more likely, not caring whether or not the reader/listener will accept the challenge and hear in the staccato syllables—leaving behind a literal phonetic memory of vowel consonant clusters—the patterned foreshadowing foundation for the final lengthening phrase: “in the darkness which roared outside.” This is a near perfect example—in its minimalist achievement of closure—of Baldwin’s genius as a composer: a confirmation of Langston Hughes’ description of Baldwin’s use of words “as the sea uses waves, to flow and beat, advance and retreat, rise and take a bow in disappearing” (9). And yet, the ending of this brief passage is an explicit pointer to contextual clues: “outside.” I take this, along with the story’s enigmatic closing metaphor, which alludes to the Old Testament “cup of trembling” to return the story to its origins: the Harlem of its protagonists and the bebop revolution.

### Contexts & Contingent Conclusions

Although the ambiguities of “Sonny’s Blues” can sometimes take on the qualities of a large and pungent onion—slippery, multi-layered, and possibly tear inducing—new readings are afforded by exploring the bebop revolution of the 1940s and 50s for clues related to jazz style and the cult of heroin use among the musicians. The allusions to Charlie Parker, perhaps the most famous of the bebop junkies, are implicit and explicit in the story, as are the frequent references in Baldwin’s work to the importance of black

musical traditions to his being and to his practice as a writer. *The Amen Corner*, a near contemporary to “Sonny’s Blues,” for example, is dedicated to a group of blues and jazz musicians: Nina Simone, Ray Charles, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and Billie Holiday. (At least three of the members of this list struggled at length with heroin addiction: Davis, Parker and Holiday.) A further indicator of Baldwin’s awareness of the dimensions of what Eric Lott dubs “Bebop’s Politics of Style” can be found in Baldwin’s 1959 review of Hughes’ *Selected Poems (Collected Essays 615)*.

Negro speech is vivid largely because it is private. It is a kind of emotional shorthand—or sleight-of-hand-by means of which Negroes express, not only their relationship to each other, but also their judgment of the white world. And, as the white world takes over this vocabulary—without the faintest notion of what it really means—the vocabulary is forced to change. The same thing is true of Negro music, which has had to become more and more complex in order to continue to express any of the private or collective experience.

This points directly to the defiance explicit in Lott’s encapsulation of the bebop revolution, and its “aesthetic of speed and displacement” (461).

Bebop was about making disciplined imagination alive and answerable to the social change of its time. “Ko-Ko,” Charlie Parker’s first recorded masterpiece, suggested that jazz was a struggle which pitted mind against the perversity of circumstance, and that in this struggle blinding virtuosity was the best weapon (457).

This “blinding virtuosity” was an aspect of hipness, and as many biographies and portraits of the period have reported, heroin was a part of this chic new code of black self-assurance. According to A. B. Spellman, in a statement eerily close to Sonny’s statements in Baldwin’s story, “heroin, because its effect blocks out all doubt, is a drug that facilitates self-assurance” (193). While it would be rank speculation to try to identify living (or deceased) models for the musicians depicted in “Sonny’ Blues,” the cult of heroin was widespread. Harlem born musicians—Sonny Rollins, Jackie McLean, Bud Powell—all struggled with drug habits, as did those attracted to the New York scene from the south and west, John Coltrane and Miles Davis, for example, among others. As

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Lott notes, the zoot suits, berets, sunglasses and other aspects of cool were the visual and linguistic signifiers of the "self-images, alliances, and strategies of differentiation" (460) which are paralleled as well as depicted in Baldwin's bebop narrative. And it is through an understanding of these deceptions (or "sleights-of-hand" in Baldwin's formulation) that we may come to terms with the final ambiguity of "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin's allusion to the Old Testament story of Isaiah.

As Byerman notes in his study of "Sonny's Blues," there is no reference in Isaiah to the cup of trembling remaining. Yahweh, the Hebrew God has taken it away as a sign that he has forgiven the Jews their transgressions against him (Isaiah, 51:17-23). Byerman attributes this deviation from scripture to "the continuation of the narrator's practice of reading events through the vehicle of his own language" and goes on to argue that this is a necessary fabrication, part and parcel of the necessity for the author to "lie in order to tell the truth" (203). In the paragraphs leading up to this mysterious image, Sonny has re-discovered himself in the music, as a member of the ensemble, improvising a version of "Am I Blue" which instructs and uplifts:

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 (862).

On two points, however, caution may be advisable. First, the narrator is hedging, if ever so slightly, in the rush of words, asserting only that we *may* triumph. In other words, the struggles for personal and collective liberation will continue, which he then confirms explicitly, acknowledging his awareness that the communion with family across history "was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky" (863). Then, like a final cymbal clash, the narrative ends with the cocktail transformed into the image of the cup of trembling. Should we read this as a hopeful sign, or are we condemned by the knowledge that Sonny's (our) weakness, represented by heroin addiction, can always "come again?" Perhaps, we will have to make do with indeterminacy, with an existentialist faith in our

potential for virtuosity—including its limitations, and the knowledge that no God will come and remove the causes of suffering from our midst. Answers and new questions may be found in the work of the musicians of Baldwin's generation who survived the heroin vogue and went on to explore new musical and spiritual forms, for they have served as inspiration to new generations of writers, still defining new inter-ethnic and inter-textual reading strategies.

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