

A Study of Sociological Issues in “Sonny’s Blues”

Min Prasad Sharma

Siddharthanagar 9, Rupandehi Campus

ORCID : 0000-0001-6424-7625

E-mail: minprasadsharma143@gmail.com, Cell: 9847130393

Parthivendra Upadhyaya

Siddharthanagar 9, Rupandehi Campus

ORCID : 0000-0001-9404-1169

E-mail: parthivendra@rupandehicampus.edu.np, Cell: 9867292404

Abstract

This research paper examines the sociological aspects and impact of blues in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." Utilizing a sociological criticism approach, the study analyzes the dynamics of blues in the story and explores the dystopian environment of Harlem, highlighting the suffering experienced by Sonny and other black youths. The theoretical perspective applied emphasizes the relationship between the author and the text, contextualizing it within the social and cultural milieu. Through a close examination of the narrative, the paper reveals the role of blues as a means of expression and resilience for black Americans, transcending their collective experience. The findings underscore the significance of cultural heritage and the power of music in overcoming adversity. The research provides valuable insights into the societal issues faced by marginalized communities and emphasizes the importance of intra community harmony.

Keywords: sociological aspects, blues music, James Baldwin, Sonny's Blues, dystopian Harlem, suffering and hardship

Introduction

"Sonny's Blues" is a short story extracted from the 1965 collection entitled *Going to Meet the Man*. "Sonny's Blues" is a moderate ethnic discourse that frequently appeared in anthologies. "Sonny's Blues" is a part of a story collection by James Baldwin published in 1957, with the conscious choices of the writer's own story. "Sonny's Blues" is all about the suffering from the hardship that the characters and their community have faced throughout their life but a

desire to do something. In the story the main character, Sonny suppresses his pain and suffering, he has been using heroin and is arrested for that. After being released, he is forced to deal with them. Sonny is an introvert person, who uses the blues to express his suffering. Narrator observes changes in Sonny by developing the ability to deal with his sufferings and problems through music instead of drug, who does not want to be entangled around the hardship of life. At the beginning of the story, Sonny is arrested for peddling heroin while his brother is an Algebra teacher at a school and the story ends with, Sonny playing some blues in Greenwich Village Club in the presence of his brother. There are several incidents in the story that makes us realize about the hardship and suffering by almost all the characters. The story speaks about both the black and the white, alerting them to social injustice, and encouraging them to intra-community harmony. Highlighting on the universality of all black experience, Baldwin (1995) writes:

So we drove along, between the green of the park and the stony, lifeless elegance of hotels and apartment buildings, toward the vivid, killing streets of our childhood. These streets hadn't changed, though housing projects jutted up out of them now like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea. Most of the houses in which we had grown up had vanished, as had the stores from which we had stolen, the basements in which we had first tried sex, the rooftops from which we had hurled tin cans and bricks. But houses exactly like the houses of our past yet dominated the landscape, boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothering in these houses, came down into the streets for light and air... (p.112)

The story revolves around the resolution of a family crisis: the narrator's estranged from his younger brother by his social success, looks back on himself and realizes that the respectable teacher of mathematics and the jazz pianist, as well as a survivor of drug abuse, have the same roots. This research will be a sociological critical inquiry into the impact and role of blues in Sonny's life as well as in the lives of black youths and at the same time it will underscore the pains and suffering of Sonny in particular and black youths in general. First, the research will present a general theoretical perspective; second, the dynamics of blues in the story and finally explore the dystopian Harlem and underscore the sufferings.

Discussion and Analysis

Theoretical Perspective

As mentioned before this research will be a sociological criticism on “Sonny’s Blues.” According to sociological criticism a work of art should analyze the relation of the author with the text as well as a text should be contextualized in the time, place and other context in which it was created. In this sense, sociological criticism explores in two dimensions: first, the relationships between the artist and the text; second, the analysis of the social content of literary works—what artistic, cultural, economic, or political values a particular text tries to explore or promote (Peck, 1921). This research will go with the second dimension and explore the dynamics of blues in the story as well as present the dysfunction and dire situation of the life in Harlem, the suffering it generates and its impact on Sonny and other black youths.

Dynamics of the Blues

The title of the short story immerses the reader in the African-American romantic universe by recalling the struggle of colored people. The concept of “blues” also emerges twice into the black musical world through the name of the character or the younger brother of the narrator called ‘Sonny’, one of the main "howlers" heroes of the blues.

The news about Sonny’s bust is like the tune whistled by a student leaving high school. It is a melody that is both very simple and very complicated, mixed with the noise of the street but still perceptible and very personal. It's a painful air of the black experience that the narrator finds in him. Furthermore, it is a theme of both musical and social that constructs and modulates in multiple variations. The text builds a bluesy atmosphere from the very first sentences. Images and situations, the swinging lights of the passing by cars in the subway and the trapped faces of darkness roaring outside, evoke the pain of living typical of the blues. It's not just about atmosphere: associating darkness with a roar in this way defies sensory activity, just as the blues defies the rule of harmony.

Like the blues, the short story speaks in the first person to recount the life of the black people living in the white dominated place. The status of the narrator forbids him the function of anonymous interpreter and, like the other characters; he has infinitely more substance than the stereotyped characters inhabiting blues texts. The blues is produced by people of underclasses for underprivileged, expressing their pain through music. It is an artistic expression

that owes a lot to tradition and is difficult to compare to media coverage and the linguistic work invested in a short story.

The story is all about the struggle for the right to live with dignity of black American living in Harlem. The only way out to discharge from such situation is only death.

It is an unacceptable reality with no means of escape except through death. The aesthetic illusions (the blues) conjure life out of the darkness, and the anesthetic delusions bring death in the guise of life. What the narrator is beginning to realize is that it is the reality from which he comes as well (Reid, 2000, p.447).

The narrator wants to escape from the place because he is really frustrated with the place after the realization that his parents and seniors have faced hardships because of the discrimination. "When he realizes Sonny's inability to escape the trap, the narrator, for the first time, begins to look at where he is and the people of which he is a part" (Reid, 2000, p.447). In the article "James Baldwin's vision of otherness in 'Sonny's Blues' and 'Giovanni's room'" Ronald Bieganowski (1988) writes "Brother begins his escape from the dark outside when the death of his daughter makes him think of Sonny and his trouble. Brother's route to freedom goes from self-image trapped in the subway window to recognizing Sonny as the own brother in the nightclub's" (p.75). The narrator understands that his brother is being trapped by the place and its culture.

The short story is all about the defeat of Sonny, narrator's being a teacher and leaving Harlem, killing of narrator's uncle by a car full of drunk white men, death of the narrator's parents, death of Grace (narrator's child), presentation of Harlem as a trap and narrator's realization about the misconception regarding the recklessness in nurturing and understanding Sonny's passion of music.

At first, it extends the narrator's painful experience to the entire black community. The short story faithfully follows a good structure of the blues that is relevant to the real situation. The first movement begins with the narrator's childhood, where his mother requests the narrator to take care of his brother. The second movement is the melancholy because of Grace's death and Sonny's addiction to drugs (heroin) after returning from the war that marks the presence of the dangers awaiting blacks. The third movement is the breaking point, which introduces the resurgent harmony between the two brothers. The fourth point is a racial discrimination in

regard to the punishment of the type of crime committed, as the drunken white men who killed Sonny's uncle were not arrested or punished but the drug user Sonny was jailed.

On the other hand, the framework of the short story makes it possible to measure the shift in the textual structure of the blues. The first segment, which traces the clash between the middle-class musical ideal of the narrator and the ethnic musical ideal of Sonny, responds to the segment in which it provides a plausible explanation for the defeat from Sonny. "The struggle to redefine oneself in the face of universal opposition is the subject of the story, where Sonny ultimately triumphs because he learns to accept and appreciate his cultural heritage and transform it into art" (Jones, 1970, p.465). Sonny's mindset to adopt and preserve his own culture of playing jazz music in Piano shows triumphs to accept and appreciate the culture one is born and brought up in. A part evokes the specter of the crushing of black, but the second mentions an attempt at personal valorization with the commitment of Sonny in the American navy to flee the dangers of Harlem. The thematic content is identical with a more personal apprehension of the difficulties.

Finally, the response to each other between the family past (death of the uncle) and the present heralding Sonny's chances of integration; and the introduction is about the resolution of the crisis which has occurred in almost all the parts of the story.

Dystopia and the Sufferings

The short story dresses a structure of blues with variations and echoes in the style of jazz (Albert, 1984, p.178). The characters are duplicated, as for example when the narrator, seized with a feeling of guilt for having abandoned his brother, watches his colleagues leave school in a hurry, splitting the groups of students with the most perfect indifference. Sonny has three things directly relevant in the story: the friend who gave him a taste of drugs, his uncle, also a musician, and finally his father, fragile like him. The suffering is also true for the female characters: Isabel (the narrator's wife), his mother suffered from extreme family management pressure and Grace who died of polio because of lack of treatment due to poverty.

In the story "Sonny's Blues" Baldwin (1995) recalls the duplication of characters corresponds to situational echoes. For example, the sun shows no mercy for Sonny's friend, whom the narrator refers to by the generic term "boy" which reflects the character's poverty level "The bright sun deadened his damp dark brown skin, and it made his eyes look yellow

and showed up the dirt in his conked hair” (p.90). While the same, sun reveals Sonny at his best by bringing out his brassy complexion (p.113). Similarly, the music from the jukebox seems to shake the pavement (p.105), while the laughter of one of the musicians of the Creole orchestra is compared to an earthquake (p.20). Variations and echoes build the ideological dynamics of the short story. The variations globalize the black experience; and an echo like the earthquake connects authentic jazz with the life of the humble waitress. The short story borrows from the text of the blues by associating the musician's gleaming teeth with a lighthouse (p.112).

Everything is not same and constant forever, it takes time and will definitely change a day which has been proven in the story.

The story of Sonny and his brother an intuition of the meaning of the Blues repairs the relationship between the two men who have chosen different ways to cope with the menacing ghetto environment, and their reconciliation through the medium of this Afro-American musical form extends the meaning of the individual's Blues until it becomes a metaphor of Black community (Reilly, 1970, p.57).

Associating a popular black song of blues with an unresolved tragedy is based on a concept born out of the commercialization of the blues. If the blues discography can suggest that it is almost entirely focused on pain, it also knows how to mock or lead to hope.

"Sonny's Blues" holds a modern discourse of cultural tolerance. The narrator feels responsible for Sonny's downfall because he failed to accept his attraction to black music. Sonny's musical aspirations obviously represent the right of blacks to their cultural difference; and the responsibility of the "embedded" narrator translates into the responsibility of the dominant white society that rejects African-American culture. This speech is rather supported: before returning to fight in the Pacific, the narrator entrusts Sonny, who has become an orphan, to his parents-in-law. However, Isabel's family is bourgeois (“dirty” and "stuck", says the text (Baldwin, 1995, p.106) using a contemptuous term of black slang), that has considered the daughter's choice to marry the narrator and accept to keep the narrator's brother with them. But the tolerance level breaks down when Sonny's behavior changes to skipping school and frequenting the ghetto.

The narrator compares Harlem to a trap; but there is no worse trap than self-enclosure. Windows and doors are repetitive reminders of the unfulfilled or denied need for

communication; and cigarette smoke conceals his gaze. Confinement in itself is of course a matter of social class. Sonny and other young black boys like him have no other name in the short story than a racist term, "a boy from around our block" (Baldwin, 1995, p.89). He is known by not knowing how to walk without dragging his feet, and there are ample connotations of inferiority and irresistibly in the story.

The narrator recovers "blank" words and judgments, for example "a good boy" used (Baldwin, 1995, p.88) to characterize Sonny. His integrated black discourse is betrayed in his social prejudices; the women of the color are on the verge of prostitution, or his obsession with respectability which makes him abhor black bohemianism, using drugs and the world of music which attracts its junior.

The figure of the narrator as "black white", a hybrid social individual created in the United States, is without precedent in Baldwin's work. He is reminiscent of the Gabriel from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, just as Sonny is reminiscent of Johnny (aka Ishmael) the bastard stepson in that same novel (Barlow, 2016, pp.137-43).

This story echoes the clash relationship between the young brother and his father; and the narrator's sense of guilt (which is important to grasp in relation to the solemn promise made to his mother to take care of Sonny "I won't forget," [...] "Don't you worry, I won't forget. I won't let anything happen to Sonny" (Baldwin, 1995, p.102) is reminiscent of the "Autobiographical Notes" opening notes of a *Native Son* where the author evokes his way of occupying himself, as the eldest son, of his many brothers and sisters: a baby in one hand, a book in the other (Dempsey, 2011, p.71).

The "political" metaphor of the family naturally presents itself to a text recommending unity and tolerance; especially in an African-American context. The family metaphor of "Sonny's Blues" emerges from the depths of African-American culture. The ultimate trigger for rediscovered fraternity belongs to the African-American religious context (Ashraf, 1991, p.328). The narrator forgets his presuppositions of imposture of the preachers by finding in their ceremony his black roots of the south. The bipolarity present throughout the short story (opposition between darkness and light, between ascending and descending movements, between rock and breaking water, between interior and exterior) is resolved after the revival. The story is all about the narrator, who finds his own destiny in the improvisation of his

younger brother. Both the brothers were looking out of their doors to view something, but with different eyes.

Throughout Baldwin's works, blacks in the United States are presented as being victimized by most whites. The means of surviving in such a setting is, Baldwin suggests, being both honest (especially with oneself) and creative. The majority of those who do survive draw both understanding and strength from the black American blues (Mosher, 1992, p.123).

After watching all of his brother's struggles pour out as he plays, and only then does he finally realize who Sonny is and what he's made of.

This sociological insight is embedded in the way Harlem is represented in the narration, as the physical manifestation of the social forces working on the main characters. The brothers gain a deeper understanding of themselves and each other only when they face the impact Harlem has had in shaping who they are (Kim, 2018, p.164).

The realization of the narrator at the end of the story reveals the unity and harmony that lies in African-American culture at Harlem.

Conclusion

In conclusion, James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" highlights the profound impact of blues music on the characters' lives, particularly Sonny and the broader black youth community. By adopting a sociological critical approach, the study contextualizes the author's relationship with the text and explores the social content embedded within the narrative. The dynamics of blues in the story serve as a powerful metaphor for the struggles and hardships faced by black Americans in Harlem.

The study uncovers the multifaceted nature of blues, which transcends mere musical expression and becomes a vehicle for resilience, cultural identity, and communal unity. It emphasizes the significance of embracing one's cultural heritage and finding solace and strength within artistic forms. Moreover, it sheds light on the stark realities of poverty, discrimination, and systemic oppression, which permeate the lives of the characters and their community.

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of intra-community harmony, urging both black and white readers to confront social injustices and foster understanding. By examining the

transformative journey of the narrator, who comes to recognize the value of blues and reconnect with his brother, the paper highlights the potential for personal growth and reconciliation. Clearly, this research contributes to the sociological discourse by exploring the power of music as a means of resilience and self-discovery within marginalized communities, ultimately advocating for social change and equality.

References

- Albert, R. N. (1984). The Jazz-Blues Motif in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues". *College Literature*, 11(2), 178-185. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111592>.
- Baldwin, J. (1967). "Sonny's Blues" *Going to Meet the Man*, Corgi Books, 83-123.
- Barlow, D. (2016). Blues Narrative Form, African American Fiction, and the African Diaspora. *Narrative*, 24(2), 134-155. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26405326>.
- Bieganowski, R. (1988). James Baldwin's vision of otherness in "Sonny's Blues" and "Giovanni's Room". *CLA Journal*, 32(1), 69-80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44324894>.
- Clark, M. (1985). James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues": Childhood, light and art. *CLA Journal*, 29(2), 197-205. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44322387>.
- Dempsey, J. (2011). Waiting for You: Beauford Delaney as James Baldwin's Inspiration for the Character Creole in "Sonny's Blues". *Obsidian*, 12(1), 60-78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44489341>.
- Goldman, S. B. (1974, October). James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues": A Message in Music. In *Negro American Literature Forum*, 8(3), 231-233. St. Louis University. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041461>.
- Jones, J. C. (1999). Finding a Way to Listen: The Emergence of the Hero as an Artist in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues". *CLA Journal*, 42(4), 462-482. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44323260>.
- Joseph Golden, T. (2012). Epistemic Addiction: Reading "Sonny's Blues" with Levinas, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 26(3), 554-571. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.26.3.0554>.
- Kim, E. Y. (2018). The Sociology of the Ghetto in James Baldwin's SONNY'S BLUES. *The Explicator*, 76(3), 161-165.

- Mosher, M. (1982). "James Baldwin's Blues." *CLA Journal*, 26(1), College Language Association, 112–124. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44329456>.
- Ognibene, E. R. (1971). Black Literature Revisited: "Sonny's Blues". *English Journal*, 60(1), 36-37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/813336>.
- Pavlić, E. (2006). Rim-Shots on Reading, Rhythm, and Fascination. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489162>.
- Peck, H. W. (1921). The Social Criticism of Literature. *The Sewanee Review*, 29(2), Johns Hopkins University Press, 134–146. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27533>.
- Reid, R. (2000). The Powers of Darkness in "Sonny's Blues." *CLA Journal*, 43(4), 443–453. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44325008>
- Reilly, J. M. (1970, July). "Sonny's Blues": James Baldwin's Image of Black Community. In *Negro American Literature Forum*, 4(2), 56-60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041352>.
- Rushdy, A. H. (1991). Fraternal Blues: John Edgar Wideman's Homewood Trilogy. *Contemporary Literature*, 312-345. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1208560>.
- Sherard, T. (1998). Sonny's Bebop: Baldwin's "Blues Text" as Intracultural Critique. *African American Review*, 32(4), 691-705. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2901246>.