

## Incipit to "Sonny's Blues" James Baldwin

**1. Function:** it announces the themes and introduces the characters.

Title: the title refers to the blues, a style of music and song, an art form historically linked to the African American community. The text is a "blues" and it will tell Sonny's story.

Setting: Harlem, Afro-American ghetto in the city of New York.

Characters: two brothers, the narrator and Sonny (cf. p. 31) divided by education and success: one is a drug addict, the other a teacher. Unnamed 1<sup>st</sup> person narrator (homodiegetic) is an algebra teacher in a school in Harlem. He reads about his brother's arrest for drug possession in the paper on his way to work.

Diegesis: the reader only learns on line 23 that the brother has been arrested. Suspense is created by the withdrawal of information from the reader. The text is not so much about that arrest as about the narrator's thoughts and feelings.

**2. Stream of consciousness:** the narrator explains how he has tried to block the reality of his brother's life, to separate himself from it ("I could not find any room for it anywhere inside me"). The two brothers do not connect (he has learned about his arrest in the paper and the reader infers that they consequently are out of touch with each other). The narrator explains his own blindness by going back to their childhood. Sonny was good, could not have gone under. The link to reminiscence ("I was remembering", line 16) announces one of the modalities of the short story: the flashbacks: "When he was about as old as the boys in my classes..." (line 19).

The text is also about an awareness, an epiphany: the narrator understands something for the first time (line 56); he cannot deny a certain reality. The short story will chart that coming to consciousness.

### 4. Duplication, mirror effects, repetitions

The text functions around figures of duplication and contains many repetitions.

The reading narrator in the first paragraph is a double of the reader (who is reading the story).

This duplication is further stressed by the repetitions ("I read" (three times); "stared" / "scared"; "believe", "quick"). The narrator sees himself in the others (anonymous passengers in the subway) he sees his own face.

The pupils remind the narrator of his brother and himself when they were young. The final line makes this mirror effect explicit the narrator hears his brother in his student's laughter and himself. This inclusion replays the duplication of the first paragraph in reverse.

**3. "Sonny":** son/brother: link between the brothers is more like the link between father and son; the older brother takes care of the younger one yet the older brother does not really play his role; he does not "listen" to him (until the end of the story when Sonny calls him his brother and the older brother understands Sonny through the music he plays).

The pupils are the sons; they are like him and his brother. The class is a picture of what the narrator and his brother were. There is a sense that these Harlem lives are trapped in repetition. The kids cannot have high expectations. Sonny's arrest brings home to the narrator the inevitability of similar destinies for the children he teaches. He is disenchanted. He projects his own feelings on the children and their laughter. Togetherness goes together with aloneness.

### 4. Metaphors

1. The extended metaphor of the ice at the beginning explains the narrator's inability to connect with his brother. This metaphor is taken up again line 53 with the metaphor of the steam bath.

2. The darkness of the first paragraph (literal darkness outside the subway car) is taken up again later to explain the "darknesses" that entrap the children. The opposition between light and darkness structures the text: (all that light in his face gone out line

The metaphor of music and communication: "listening" to the students, listening to the sound of laughter. Hearing means understanding

3. Inside/outside: this division throughout the text emphasizes the difficulty the narrator has empathizing with his brother. It is also the motion of the stream of consciousness (inside feelings). The special division reproduces his alienation from his brother ("I listened to the boys outside", line 54)

**Conclusion:** The theme of music is present in the title. The incipit establishes the story as the narrator's quest for understanding his brother and himself, and beyond, the human condition in an oppressive environment.