

Questions and Proposals about James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues."

For future readers of these study questions:

The page numbers indicated below are from *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Seventh Edition, eds. R. V. Cassill and Richard Bausch, 2006. In the All Souls Book Group at the Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville, NC, we used this anthology for a course in the short story.

In composing these study questions on "Sonny's Blues," I am indebted to the writer Robert Boswell, who gave a wonderful class on the story at the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, in the Summer of 1998. I attended the class myself, and have also been able to listen to an audio recording of the class here in 2009. It is from this recording that I have culled these questions.

(For those of you wanting to explore the audio recordings of the lectures, classes and readings given in the Warren Wilson MFA Program, please visit the following website: www.warren-wilson.edu/~mfa/newwebsite/homepage.php. On the left of this site page is a link, "Audio Recordings," which will give you information as to how to obtain recordings.)

1. How the story's characters endure their suffering

The story is about suffering, and how to endure it. "I said: 'But there's no way not to suffer—is there, Sonny?' 'I believe not,' he said and smiled, 'but that's never stopped anyone from trying.'" (38, bottom of the page.) How does the narrator endure his suffering; how, more particularly, has he set up his life so as to endure it (even set up his consciousness)? How does Sonny endure it? And how do other characters in the story endure it?

A corollary to the above question: Heroin is one of the ways suffering is endured in this story. What are the other ways? Could algebra be thought of as a way? What about music? What about religion?

2. "Behold, I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling"

The final sentence of the story, really the final image, refers to a verse from Isaiah, verse 51.22. The verse reads as follows (St. James):

22 Thus saith thy Lord the LORD, and thy God that pleadeth the cause of his people, Behold, I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, even the dregs of the cup of my fury; though shalt no more drink it again:

23 But I will put it into the hand of them that afflict thee; which have said to thy soul, Bow down, that we may go over: and thou has laid thy body as the ground, and as the street, to them that went over.

How are these verses present in the narrative of "Sonny's Blues"? Why do you think Baldwin wanted readers to be thinking about them as they closed the story?

3. The Imagery in the Story: Ice and Water, Darkness and Light

One thing you might do to get inside of this story is to track the WATER imagery, and the LIGHT and DARK imagery, from beginning to end. You'll note that at the opening of the story, the narrator describes how a "great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long (21)." By the end of the story, we could say that that ice has fully melted, for the narrator is listening to his brother move out into the "deep water" as he plays his music.

You'll also notice that the story's meanings are embodied in images of dark and light, a very traditional (even cliché) image system in which light represents good, safety, health; and dark represents menace, despair, death.

What are you learning as you track the imagery in this story? It's remarkable, isn't it, that Baldwin is able to pull it off--that he's actually able to make fresh use of these old tropes. That he IS able to make use of them may have something to do with his belief in story itself, a belief he communicates to his reader at the bottom of page 42: "He [Creole] and his boys were up there 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."

P.S.: A complication to things. Could "darkness" hold a meaning for Baldwin and for Civil Rights activists and/ or theorists/ writers about racial oppression in America that

I might not be aware of? I don't know the answer, but I have read Cornel West use the term "darkness" his writings, most recently on Barack Obama. So this interjection is meant to invite those meanings, if they indeed obtain in "Sonny's Blues."

3. Why is the ending of the story so powerful? A question about the structure of the story.

The ending of the story is powerful, and one question members of a reading group might ask together is why it is so powerful. More particularly, how is the story *structured* so that we experience the rush of emotion we do (I won't name that emotion, so as not to force things) as we read the story's final paragraphs? Robert Boswell, in the class he gave on the story at Warren Wilson in 1998, showed readers this very structure. He showed how the story works to bring the narrator increasingly closer to Sonny (and to Sonny's blues) as the story proceeds. You'll note that the narrator's first encounter with Sonny happens through the newspaper: "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" (20). This first encounter, then, is a distant one (to say the least.) Then, the narrator is visited at the school where he works by a boy who is like Sonny, and who knows about Sonny, and who could therefore be thought of as a proxy for Sonny—but who isn't Sonny. Then, on p. 25, the narrator receives a letter from Sonny, an encounter perhaps more intimate than the previous two.

Go back through the story and watch for this progression, from distance to intimacy, from intellection "about" someone to actually hearing, actually experiencing, his or her blues. Watch also for the narrator's effort to take Sonny in, and on Sonny's terms (as opposed to the narrator's terms.)

Question: What kind of reader do you think James Baldwin wrote this story for, given what you are learning through studying the story's structure? How does the story accommodate, and/ or "speak to," that white, comfortable reader who has no first-hand experience of Sonny's world, Sonny's blues? Also, which of these two men do you more readily identify with—the narrator, or Sonny? Why?

A corollary: It was said in Robert Boswell's class multiple times, by Boswell and by the students, that we, the reader,

are complicit with the narrator's point of view, both politically and emotionally. And so the movement the narrator has to make at the end the story, away from safety and out into the "deep water," is our movement, too (p. 42). Thoughts?

4. Is this a world in which the old stories and parables no longer apply?

One of the students in Robert Boswell's class made an interesting remark I'd like to include here for your consideration. The remark had to do with seeing "Sonny's Blues" as a version of the story of the Prodigal Son. The student's name was Michael, and what he said was that "Sonny's Blues" could be considered as a version of "The Prodigal Son," *though without the father*. For in the world of "Sonny's Blues"—Black American Harlem in the middle decades of the 20th century—fathers could not always be counted upon to be there when their prodigal sons came home—not, it should be said, because those fathers had failed at their responsibilities, rather because they lacked the necessary resources to meet them.

"Sonny's Blues," then, according to Michael's interpretation, can be seen as a critical response to any kind of story, such as a parable, whose intention is to instruct, and/ or to change consciousness in such a way as to make possible a God-like kind of forgiveness, one to the other. For in *this* world, says Michael's interpretation—a world of limited horizon, systematic oppression, and, therefore, suffering as a way of life—the old parables may no longer match up with the contents of lived reality. In this world, brothers have to figure it out on their own.

What are your thoughts, here?

5. The narrator's (seeming) disaffection about the death of his young daughter

It's remarkable, isn't it, the disaffection with which the narrator mentions the death of his little girl. (He doesn't even set out to tell the reader about it, rather mentions it in passing.) Here is the passage:

"And I didn't write Sonny or send him anything for a long time. When I finally did, it was just after my little girl died, and he wrote me back a letter which made me feel like a bastard."

How does this response to Gracie's death, or lack of response, seem consistent with what you are growing to understand about the narrator generally? It would seem that the death of a child is, for the narrator, just one more difficulty he has to "take," to accept.

You'll also notice that by the end of the story, the narrator will talk about Gracie with more affect, more feeling. What do you think has happened to him across the story that would allow him finally to express those feelings?

6. Narrator's inclination to see the child's face (or the child) in the adult

You may have noticed the narrator's habit of seeing the child in the adult he is talking to and/or observing. The narrator does this with the addicted boy-man who comes to visit the narrator at the school where he teaches (this exchange happens on p. 23). He does it as well with the barmaid he observes, while talking to that boy-man, on p. 24. And he does it several times as he talks to Sonny. Robert Boswell: "It seems that when the narrator recognizes this child-element in the adult, he can acknowledge it, but he also sees it as a weakness." What does this tendency reveal to you about the narrator, and about the way, again, he has set up his life so as to endure his suffering?

7. "A sadness that goes beyond sadness"

One of the remarks made in Robert Boswell's class that has stuck with me over the years came from a writer named Andrea Barrett, who described the story as about "a kind of sadness that goes beyond sadness." Do you, in your reading of "Sonny's Blues," identify with this remark? Why or why not? Please be specific to the story as you answer this question.

Looking forward to seeing you Monday,

Emilie

