

Notes on *Sonny's Blues* by James Baldwin

Context→

James Arthur Baldwin was born on August 2, 1924, in New York's Harlem neighborhood. As the center of African American culture at that time, Harlem was at once a culturally vibrant community of artists and musicians and a neighborhood deeply affected by poverty and violence. Baldwin's mother, after being abandoned by Baldwin's legitimate father, worked as a domestic servant and eventually married David Baldwin, a preacher whose strong influence on his stepson was evident not only in James Baldwin's writing but also in his strong religious devotion. While still a teenager, Baldwin experienced a religious epiphany that led him to become a preacher, an experience that Baldwin used as the basis for his most famous novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952), and incorporated into his play *The Amen Corner* (1968) and much of his other writing.

Baldwin's religious fervor had its complications. He had a difficult relationship with his stepfather, and while attending De Witt Clinton High School in the Bronx, he grew to accept his homosexuality, further complicating his role in the church. At De Witt Clinton, Baldwin stood out for his literary talent and ambition. He began spending his spare time in Greenwich Village, the heart of the post-World War II artistic community. There, he met Richard Wright, who had already established himself as an author. Wright helped Baldwin win a fellowship to work on his first novel, which went unpublished.

Baldwin turned toward literary criticism as he struggled to make a career for himself as a writer. Frustrated with life in America, Baldwin left New York for Paris, where he met some of the most noted writers and philosophers of the era, including Saul Bellow and the French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre. Baldwin also began to establish a name for himself through a series of essays, some of which were pointedly directed at Baldwin's first literary mentor, Richard Wright. Despite the success of his essays, Baldwin had yet to fulfill his dream of publishing a novel. In 1951, he retreated to a small village in the Swiss Alps to write what would become his first and most celebrated novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Highly autobiographical, the novel is set in the Harlem of Baldwin's youth and concerns the religious salvation of a young man, John Grimes, and his problematic relationship with his stepfather.

Go Tell It on the Mountain brought Baldwin wide recognition. The novel was nominated for a National Book Award and brought Baldwin into the forefront of American literature. A few years later, in 1956, Baldwin published *Notes of a Native Son*, a collection of essays that focused on race in America. The civil rights movement had just burgeoned into a national struggle, and Baldwin became one of its most outspoken and eloquent advocates. He appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine and published another highly regarded essay collection, *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country* (1962), received mixed reviews but went on nonetheless to sell millions of copies.

Baldwin reached the peak of his fame and popularity as the civil rights movement began its gradual decline, after a number of major victories and the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. Baldwin continued to turn out an almost relentless series of books, both fiction and nonfiction. Although none of his new books were as well received as his earlier writing, Baldwin's work continued to express the dominant themes and images from his life. Racial segregation, Harlem, and the nearly overwhelming obstacles faced by young African American men raised in poverty occur again and again throughout his work.

“Sonny’s Blues” was one of Baldwin’s earliest short stories. Originally published in the *Partisan Review* in 1957, “Sonny’s Blues” follows the narrator as he comes to discover who his drug-addicted, piano-playing younger brother, Sonny, truly is. Set in Harlem, like many of Baldwin’s other work, “Sonny’s Blues” is a constant struggle between light and darkness, failure and redemption. The story was included in the short-story collection *Going to Meet the Man* (1965). The collection, which spans more than a decade’s worth of Baldwin’s stories, is notable for the insight it gives into Baldwin’s development as a writer. Like much of Baldwin’s later fiction, the collection was met with mixed reviews by critics, who noted that in many of these stories Baldwin was revisiting the same themes he had covered in his previous work. Nonetheless, the stories in the collection, “Sonny’s Blues” in particular, demonstrate Baldwin’s ability to transform his social and political concerns into art. In “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin takes on Harlem’s deterioration, religion, drug addiction, and post–World War II America all at the same time. The story, like the characters in it, literally struggles under the weight of so much pressure.

In his later years, Baldwin spent less of his time in America. In December 1987, at age sixty-three, Baldwin died of stomach cancer at his home in the south of France.

Plot Overview→

The unnamed narrator of the story discovers from a newspaper that his younger brother, Sonny, has been arrested for selling and using heroin. As he prepares to teach his algebra class, the narrator remembers Sonny as a young boy. His students, he realizes, could someday end up like Sonny, given the obstacles and hardships they face growing up in Harlem. At the end of the school day, the narrator heads home, but he notices that one of Sonny’s old friends, who is always high and dirty, is waiting for him by the school. The two men walk together, talking about Sonny. The narrator simultaneously hates and pities Sonny’s friend, who, despite his problems, makes it painfully clear to the narrator just how difficult Sonny’s drug-addicted life has been and how difficult it will continue to be.

Time passes, but the narrator never writes to Sonny in prison until the narrator’s young daughter, Grace, dies. Sonny writes a long letter back to his brother in which he tries to explain how he ended up where he is. The two brothers then stay in constant communication. When Sonny gets out of jail, the narrator is there for him. He takes Sonny back to his own family’s apartment.

In an extended flashback, the narrator recalls how Sonny and their father used to fight with each other because they were so similar in spirit. He remembers the last day he saw his mother while on leave from the army, when she told him to watch out for his brother. She told him that when his father was a young man, he watched his own brother get run down by a car full of white men who never bothered to stop. The experience traumatized and damaged the narrator’s father for the rest of his life.

After that conversation with his mother, the narrator went back into the army and didn’t think about his brother again until their mother died. After the funeral, the two brothers sat and talked about Sonny’s future. Sonny told his brother about his dream of becoming a jazz pianist, which the narrator dismissed. The narrator arranged for Sonny to live with his wife’s family until Sonny graduated from college. Sonny reluctantly agreed to do so. He didn’t want to live in the house and spent all his spare time playing the piano. Although Sonny loved the music, the rest of family had a hard time bearing his constant practicing.

While living with his sister-in-law, Sonny got into trouble for skipping school. He tried to hide the truancy letters, but one eventually made it to the house. When his sister-in-law's mother confronted him, Sonny admitted to spending all his time in Greenwich Village, hanging out with musicians. The two fought, and Sonny realized what a burden he'd been on the family. After two days, Sonny joined the navy. The narrator didn't know whether Sonny was dead or alive until he received a postcard from Greece. After the war, the two brothers returned to New York, but they didn't see each other for quite some time. When they eventually met, they fought about Sonny's decisions in life. After one especially difficult fight, Sonny told his brother that he could consider him dead from that point on. The narrator walked away, telling himself that one day Sonny would need his help. The flashback ends there.

After having Sonny live with him for a few weeks, the narrator debates whether he should search Sonny's room. As he paces back and forth, he sees a street-corner revival occurring outside his window and thinks about its significance. Eventually Sonny comes home and invites his brother to watch him perform later that evening. The two brothers go to a small jazz club where everyone knows and respects Sonny. Sonny and the band get on stage and play, and as they play, the narrator watches Sonny struggle with the music. He watches all his brother's struggles come pouring out as he plays, and only then does he finally realize who Sonny is and what he's made of.

Character List→

The Narrator - Sonny's older brother. Compared to Sonny and many of the young men in Harlem, the narrator is a success, working as a math teacher and raising a family. However, he also feels trapped in Harlem, where he has lived his entire life. He knows he has an obligation to Sonny, but it takes him a while to get over his skepticism and devote himself to helping Sonny as best he can.

Sonny - The narrator's wayward younger brother. Sonny is a troubled young man who becomes addicted to heroin at an early age. Unlike many of the young boys in the neighborhood, Sonny is not hard or brutal. He keeps all of his problems bottled up—except when he plays music. Music, for Sonny, is a freeing and ultimately redemptive outlet and perhaps the only means he has for keeping himself away from prison and drugs. He channels into his performance not only his own frustration and disappointment but also that of the entire community.

Isabel - The narrator's wife. Unlike the narrator, Isabel can make Sonny feel comfortably at home in their house after Sonny is released from prison. She draws him out of his shell and makes him laugh. She can, in her own way, accept Sonny with less hesitation than the narrator. She is a caring wife and mother who watches over the narrator much the same way his mother watched over his father.

Mother - The mother of Sonny and the narrator. She dies while Sonny is still a boy. Before she dies, she expresses her deep concerns about Sonny's future to the narrator. She is acutely aware of the dangers facing her youngest son, and her final request to the narrator is that he protect his brother, just as she protected their father. Kind and loving, she has spent much of her life trying to protect her family from the darkness of the world.

Sonny's Friend - A drug addict who meets the narrator early in the story to tell him what happened to Sonny. Despite his addiction, he is able to eloquently explain the hardship that comes with drug addiction. He is a troubled, nameless soul whose brief presence in the story speaks for the countless young men in Harlem who struggle with a drug addiction.

Father - The father of Sonny and the narrator. He has the same spirit as Sonny, and as a result he fights constantly with his son. When he was a young man, he lost his brother and was haunted by it his entire life. He constantly searched for a better reality but died without finding it.

Creole - The leader of Sonny's band. An imposing older black man, Creole guides Sonny through his performance at the end of the story. He controls the playing of every member in the band.

Grace - The narrator's daughter. Grace dies of polio while Sonny is in prison. Her death prompts the narrator to write to Sonny. Her dying, although not discussed in great detail, becomes an act of grace, allowing the narrator to reach out to his brother for the first time.

Analysis of Major Characters →

The Narrator

The narrator of "Sonny's Blues" provides insight not only into Sonny and their life together but also into their environment. Although the story invokes Sonny in its title, it is through the narrator's eyes that Sonny and Harlem are revealed. Compared to most of the men in his community, the narrator has succeeded: he has a wife, two children, and a good job as a teacher. However, he is constantly aware of Harlem's darker, more dangerous side. He notes the open drug dealing that happens in the playgrounds near the housing projects, the disappearance of old homes, and, of course, his brother's ongoing battle with the world. Far from worrying solely about his family's difficulties, he frames Sonny's struggles within a larger context, situating him within the poverty, crime, and drug abuse that plague the entire community.

Though the narrator is fully conscious of his community's dark side, he tries his best to keep those problems at arm's length, refusing to let any tragedy affect him too much emotionally. Unlike Sonny, the narrator has a difficult time expressing his ideas and emotions, and only when his young daughter dies does he open up and write to his brother. The narrator believes that he has been called upon to watch over Sonny, but this knowledge doesn't lessen the burden he feels. He is constantly torn by his emotions, which shift quickly from love to hate, concern to doubt. As much as he cares for Sonny, he seems to be unable to fully accept that his brother has the capacity for change.

Sonny

From a young age, Sonny is haunted by the burden of being poor, black, and trapped within the confines of his community. As a young African American male born in Harlem, he is aware of the limits and obstacles he faces. He struggles to defy the stereotypes by moving away from Harlem and beginning a career as a musician. Unlike his brother, Sonny wants and needs an escape from Harlem and the traditional social order. Instead of being free, however, Sonny winds up being confined in prison—far from feeling trapped in his community, he is now literally captive. Even after Sonny is released from prison, the narrator describes him as a caged animal that is trying to break free from the effects that prison has had on him and from the drug addiction that led to his incarceration.

Sonny's one saving grace is his music, through which he can express all of his deep-seated longing and frustration. Sonny's music offers him a chance at redemption, but at the same time it also threatens to destroy him. To create music, Sonny has to bear the suffering and tragedies of his life and all the lives around him. He translates that suffering into an artistic expression that ultimately, even if only temporarily, redeems his audience. There is something heroic, almost Christlike, to the way Sonny offers himself up to his music. He knows that playing music may destroy him by leading him back into a life of drugs, but he also knows that it's a burden that he has to bear.

Mother

The mother in "Sonny's Blues" is an almost saintlike figure who guards and protects her children and husband from the darkness of the world, and Baldwin's biblical imagery and undertones come through clearly in her character. She shepherds her husband through the overwhelming grief that follows his brother's death, thereby living up to the biblical challenge to be "your brother's keeper." She has done more than just live a decent life: she helped bear her husband's tragedy as her own. Just as Jesus is often depicted as a shepherd, so too is the narrator's mother, whose presence makes her husband's life manageable. Her life story is a direct challenge to the narrator, who, unlike his mother, initially fails to care for his brother as he should.

In addition to her compassion, the mother also has a prophetic role to play in the narrative. She can see her own impending death and the dangers her youngest son will face. As a mother, she has protected her family, but now that she knows she is going to die, she knows she will no longer be able to guide and protect her family as she once did. Her foreshadowing of her death signals a shift in the narrator's relationship with his brother. It makes him the new protector of Sonny against the greater darkness of the world that has always threatened to invade their lives.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols →

Themes

The Obligation toward Brotherly Love

The narrator's mother, by charging him with watching over Sonny, is asking him to serve as his brother's keeper. The dynamic between the two brothers echoes, in part, the relationship between the brothers Cain and Abel in the Bible. In that narrative, Cain, after murdering Abel, asks whether he is supposed to be his brother's keeper. The narrator, following his mother's death, is presented with a similar dilemma. Since their mother's death, Sonny's life has been marred by prison and drug abuse. The tension between the two brothers is so great that after one particular fight, Sonny tells his brother to consider him dead from that point on, a statement that, again, deliberately echoes the biblical narrative of Cain and Abel. Like Cain, the narrator turns his back on his brother and fails, at first, to respond to Sonny when he is in prison. He has failed to live up to his mother's commandment that he watch over his brother—but the failure is only temporary. By the end of the story, the narrator has taken Sonny back into his home. He finally takes on the role of his brother's keeper, constantly watching and worrying over Sonny as he emerges from the darkness of prison and drug abuse.

The idea of brotherly love extends beyond the relationship between the narrator and Sonny into the community as a whole. Harlem is plagued by drugs, poverty, and frustration, but members of

the community come together to watch over and protect one another. The adults spend their Saturday afternoons sharing stories, providing a sense of warmth and protection to the children around them. The narrator, although initially angered by one of Sonny's old drug-addicted friends, in the end recognizes his connection to the man and offers him money. Even Sonny, for all his problems, helps the people around him endure and survive by channeling their frustrated desires into his music.

The Prevalence of Rage and Fury

Throughout the story, the narrator repeatedly remarks on the barely concealed rage in the people around him as a way of showing both the internal and external conflicts that haunt the characters. Fury and rage are products not only of the limited opportunities that came with being African American at that time but of life in Harlem as well. Early in the story, the narrator notes that his students are "filled with rage." They are aware of the limited opportunities available to them, and that knowledge breeds an internal, destructive rage that threatens to destroy their lives. With nowhere left to go, they inevitably turn their anger onto themselves, leading them into a life of darkness.

An equally strong rage is present in the streets of Harlem. While looking out the window, Sonny notes with amazement the simple fact that Harlem has not yet exploded. The narrator observes a "furious" man as he drops change into a church bucket. The fury that underlies daily life in Harlem is evident everywhere, even in the religious revivals held on the streets. It's a fury fueled by desperation and desire, and it finds its truest form of expression in the music Sonny plays at the end of the story. As painful and difficult as that fury is, it also makes the type of jazz Sonny plays possible. It gives life to the religious revival Sonny passes on the street, and although it inevitably exacts an enormous toll on all of the people who bear its weight, it also offers something in return.

Motifs

Imprisonment

The characters in "Sonny's Blues" are trapped both physically and emotionally. Throughout the story, the narrator and Sonny are constantly struggling to break free from one barrier or another. Sonny is physically imprisoned in jail as well as by his addiction to drugs. The narrator is confined to Harlem and, more specifically, to the housing projects that he clearly detests. In addition, he is also trapped within himself, unable to express his emotions or live up to his obligations as a brother until his daughter's death gives him the motivation he needs to change.

The narrator and Sonny are imprisoned and also free in exactly opposite ways. Sonny, while in prison, is physically locked up, and yet as a young man, he was able to do what his brother never did: escape from Harlem and create a life of his own. On the other hand, the narrator is physically free. He is not in jail or, unlike Sonny and many of the young men in his community, addicted to drugs. Nonetheless, he is trapped inside Harlem and its housing projects. As a musician, Sonny is able to express the frustration and rage that derive in part from his imprisonment. While playing the piano, he is able to break loose and live as free as any man. The narrator, however, lives his life trapped inside of himself. He has a difficult time communicating with his brother and even fails to do so because he cannot bear the emotions

that come with it. He is, in the end, temporarily freed by Sonny, whose music offers him a rare glimpse into himself.

Salvation

The narrator and Sonny are both seeking a form of salvation, not only from the world but also from themselves. The world they live in is plagued by darkness, despair, drugs, and confinement, leading each brother to seek a form of redemption that can cleanse them of their sins. Salvation in "Sonny's Blues" comes in several forms. The narrator is haunted by his failure to respond to his brother, a failure that is a denial both of his brotherly obligation to Sonny and his mother's dying request. The death of Grace, the narrator's daughter, is ultimately an act of grace. It spurs the narrator into immediately writing to his brother, whom he knows he has failed and whose forgiveness he seeks. Sonny, at the same time, has been through a form of hell and, upon his release from prison, wants to be saved from the life of drugs that destroyed him. Just before Sonny invites his brother to watch him perform, he passes a revival on the street, where salvation is promised but never fully attained. During Sonny's performance, both the narrator and Sonny find the salvation they've been seeking, even if only temporarily.

Symbols

The Cup of Trembling

At the end of the story, the narrator describes a glass sitting over Sonny's piano as shaking "like the very cup of trembling" to highlight what a difficult and complicated position Sonny is in. This image is borrowed from the Bible, where the cup of trembling is used as a symbol to describe the suffering and fear that have plagued the people. The biblical passage promises a relief from that suffering, but Baldwin's use of the cup of trembling as a symbol is less overt. Sonny's drinking from the cup of trembling serves as a reminder of all the suffering he has endured, while also offering the chance for redemption and peace. As a musician, Sonny takes all his suffering and that of those around him and transforms it into something beautiful.

Like the figures from the Bible, Sonny is moving toward salvation, but his fate remains uncertain. Perhaps he will continue to suffer, suffering being the cost he has to pay for being a musician. There is something Christlike about Sonny's pain, and suffering for Sonny is at once inevitable and redemptive. At the end of the story, it remains unclear whether he will continue to suffer in order to play his music or whether a greater peace and redemption awaits everyone involved. The fact that the glass is filled with scotch and milk only further highlights the tension and duality Sonny faces.

Housing Projects

The housing projects in Harlem were for Baldwin clear symbols of Harlem's decline and fall. He describes the projects as "rocks in the middle of a boiling sea." It is an apocalyptic image, one meant to convey the awful conditions of life inside of the projects. The phrase also has a biblical undertone in that it invokes a type of hell on earth. As rocks in a boiling sea, the projects are massive, lifeless objects surrounded by misery. The word rocks highlights the buildings' cold, brutal nature.

The projects offer up a false image, a “parody of the good,” in that they were initially built with the supposedly noble intention of providing affordable housing but in fact became almost immediately broken-down, drug-infested buildings. The projects symbolize a perversion of the real world, one in which good ideas are actually living nightmares. The projects have playgrounds that are populated by drug dealers; they have large windows that no one wants to look out of. The people who live in them are bitterly aware of what the projects are, making their existence cruel and bitterly ironic.

Light and Darkness

Light and darkness are in constant tension throughout “Sonny’s Blues,” and Baldwin uses them to highlight the warmth, hope, gloom, and despair that mark his characters’ lives. Baldwin uses light to describe Sonny’s face when he was young and the warmth that came from sitting in a room full of adults after church. Light represents all of the positive and hopeful elements that are a part of life. It also has a religious undertone. Not only does light represent the best elements of life, but it also symbolizes a form of salvation and grace. To live in the light is to live a proper, moral life.

In exact opposition to the light is the darkness that constantly threatens the characters in the story. The darkness, which represents a roster of social and personal problems, can be found everywhere. The darkness literally haunts the figures in the story, something they are acutely aware of once the sun goes down. Sonny’s life in prison, his addiction to drugs, and the general state of life in Harlem are all embodied by the darkness. As pervasive as the darkness is, however, it is always balanced against a measure of light. Light, ultimately, comes to signify salvation, comfort, and love, whereas darkness represents the fear and desolation that always threatens to extinguish it.

Music→

From the title of the story to the closing scene, music plays a central role in defining the characters and culture of Harlem in “Sonny’s Blues.” At a young age, Sonny decides he wants to grow up to become a musician, a decision that his brother has difficulty accepting. Sonny lists the great jazz musicians of his era, most notably Charlie Parker, who had broken out of the traditional conventions of jazz to create a new, freer form of musical expression. Unlike earlier forms of jazz, which relied heavily on well-developed and thoroughly planned arrangements, the music of men such as Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie was created spontaneously as the men listened and responded to each other. The music relied on instinct rather than on rigid structures. Sonny contrasts his music idols with those of the previous generation, whose rigid, classical form of musical expression is no longer valid. For Sonny, the world is an entirely different place from the one his older brother grew up in and, as a result, needs new artistic forms to convey its reality.

The music that Sonny plays and loves is based less on a strict formal order than on a pure expression of the soul. Bebop, as it came to be known, was a radical new form of jazz. For musicians like Sonny, the freedom of expression that came with bebop was a chance to live freely, defy social conventions and norms, and create something utterly original. For many of the great musicians of that era, drugs were a constant temptation. Sonny’s stated musical hero, Charlie Parker, was himself addicted to drugs and died a very early death partly as a result. At the end of the story, the narrator witnesses Sonny’s playing firsthand. The experience is similar

to the religious revival the narrator witnessed earlier, with one major exception: there is a real redemption available through the music.

Historical Context→

“Sonny’s Blues” is set in post–World War II New York, in the midst of an important cultural and political revolution that permanently changed the country. Artists from all over the world had made New York a new cultural capital, establishing Greenwich Village, where Sonny briefly lives, as the bohemian center of the city. A diverse array of artists, including the painter Jackson Pollack, musician Charlie Parker, and writer Jack Kerouac, all converged in New York around this time. These artists learned and borrowed from one another, and although there were great differences in style and subject matter, many of the artists were responding to what they believed was America’s unique cultural and political crisis following the end of the war. In “Sonny’s Blues,” Sonny wants to move past the traditional conventions of music, as did many postwar artists whose work expressed radical new notions of individual freedom and artistic liberty.

At the same time that the art scene in New York was exploding, thousands of African American soldiers were returning home from the war and heading north toward communities like Harlem, where, instead of finding new job opportunities and equal rights, they found newly constructed housing projects and vast urban slums. Sonny and his brother both serve in the war, and each returns to find a radically different life in America. It was an experience that thousands of other African Americans faced following the war’s conclusion. The civil rights movement, which had begun in the South early in the decade, had quickly begun to spread across the country as millions of African Americans began to agitate for equal rights. Although America in the 1950s was generally more conservative, the groundwork for the radical political movements of the 1960s was being laid. Hundreds of homes in Harlem were leveled to build the housing projects, which would eventually become symbols of urban blight and poverty. Harlem was at a critical juncture in its history, seemingly ready, as Sonny notes, to explode. “Sonny’s Blues” is a testimony to both the frustration of life in America’s cities and the eventual transformation of that frustration into a political and artistic movement.

Baldwin’s Style→

Baldwin’s prose style is one of the most distinctive in American literature, known for both its eloquence and rhetorical force. The Bible was one of Baldwin’s earliest literary influences. Throughout his novels and stories, he constantly relies on biblical imagery and phrases to make his moral and political points. In “Sonny’s Blues,” there is the “cup of trembling” and the description of housing projects as “rocks in the middle of a boiling sea,” a phrase that could have been lifted directly from the Book of Revelations in the Bible. Baldwin’s sentences also contain a biblical tone and rhythm. For example, near the conclusion of “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin describes the effect that Sonny’s playing had on him: “I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting.” The message and particular words that Baldwin employs also have a biblical tone. At the heart of the sentence is a desire for peace and salvation, ideas that occur repeatedly throughout the Bible.

Baldwin was a preacher before he became a writer, and there is a hint of this former preacher in much of his writing. At times, this background helped Baldwin to reach new heights of poetry and eloquence. At other times, however, Baldwin’s style was criticized for being too overbearing and direct in its use of moral statements. In “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin strikes a fine balance

between employing the occasional rhetorical flourishes and creating morally complicated characters. The closing scene of the story highlights Baldwin's talent as a stylist. Sonny's performance is like a religious sermon, but instead of the words of a preacher, there is only the music. Baldwin describes the music's effect on the narrator with as much grace as a preacher.

Important Quotations Explained→

1. Yet, when he smiled, when we shook hands, the baby brother I'd never known looked out from the depths of his private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light.

The narrator makes this observation about Sonny when he sees him after he's released from prison. Prison, for Sonny, was a hellish experience, as was his addiction to heroin. Both experiences have altered Sonny, but he remains, at heart, the same person he's always been. The narrator notes, somewhat mournfully, that he never actually knew his baby brother, even though he can see traces of him buried beneath the darkness of prison life and drug addiction. It's a painful realization, one that he is forced to confront now that Sonny has become, to some degree, his responsibility. The question that remains for Sonny is whether he can be brought back into the light, whether he can ultimately be saved. While in prison, Sonny lived like a caged animal, trapped in the misery of his life. He is physically free now, but whether he is free of his addiction and sorrow is still unclear.

2. "All that hatred down there," he said. "All that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart."

Sonny, following his release from prison, makes this observation about the street outside the window. He has just passed a religious revival being held on the street, which promises salvation even though none will actually be granted. Baldwin's story is as much about Harlem as it is about Sonny's life. This observation captures perfectly the complicated nature of the community. It is neither wholly terrible nor wholly wonderful, but rather a mixture of love and hatred. This mixture is what makes Harlem such a vibrant place, but it also threatens to destroy Harlem and the people who live there. Baldwin's concern with the particular streets in Harlem is evident throughout this story. The avenue Sonny is referring to is most likely Lenox Avenue, one of the most important streets in Harlem, which Baldwin frequently wrote about.

3. 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.

Near the middle of Sonny's performance at the end of the story, the narrator makes this claim about the music's function. The statement also holds true for Baldwin's writing. "Sonny's Blues" is a story about suffering and triumph, subjects that have been addressed countless times by other writers. Baldwin believed that these were the only things worth writing about, and throughout his prolific career he returned to the same themes again and again. Each exploration was a chance at redemption, an opportunity to make meaning out of the cruelty and hardships in life. Sonny is trying to do precisely that with his music, just as Baldwin tried to do that with his stories and essays. Art becomes the redeemer, the means by which we can save our souls.