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English 200

Dr Worthy

12/10/24

Time as a Parable for the Human Condition in *Sonny's Blues*

In literature, time frequently serves as a force through which characters evolve, relationships transform, and deeper truths about identity and human nature are revealed. In James Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues*, the passage of time takes on a fluidity that allows dynamic identities and relationships to flourish. Baldwin employs time as a narrative device to explore the complexities of understanding, perception, and emotional reconciliation. Time assumes the role of a mediator, providing space for misunderstandings and disagreements to be resolved in order to strengthen nuanced relationships. Throughout the story, time is used as an evolutionary force by which characters and relationships are fundamentally reformed. As *Sonny's Blues* concludes, time becomes a central figure: Sonny's climactic performance at the nightclub evokes a collapse of time, revealing the connectedness of his personal pain and ancestral suffering. By manipulating the stagnance of time, Baldwin explores generational patterns of trauma to reflect the lives of his characters in the experiences of their ancestors. The story culminates in a lesson of transformation and redemption that creates a bridge between the narrator's experience of the world and his brother Sonny's, relating to their differing personal circumstances. *Sonny's Blues* invokes characteristics of a parable in its portrayal of Sonny's music, through which time collapses for those who interact with Sonny, ultimately allowing for a refraction of life, death, and concrete identity.

Watching Sonny play the piano opens the narrator's mind to the push and pull relationship between a musician and their instrument. The narrator watches Sonny settle into his playing, observing him "fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own" (Baldwin 147), as if through making music, Sonny is bringing the piano to life. The concept of animating the piano by way of playing it is one form in which Sonny circumvents the constraints of reality. As he plays to "fill" the piano with "the breath of life", he interacts with the fluidity of life and death by animating the inanimate piano through his artistic expression. His passion imbues the piano with its own life, contributing to the dream-like atmosphere developed in the club and ultimately beginning the refraction of time that occurs during his performance. By extending "his own" life force into the piano, Sonny sacrifices part of himself for the sake of musical expression and disperses his life force into the audience. Sonny's performance also marks a pivotal turning point in his life and his expectations of the future, as it allows for rapid personal and interpersonal growth. Not only does the narrator grow to accept Sonny's profound connection to musical expression, but Sonny himself begins to reclaim and rebuild his identity. Returning to the piano after over a year of silence, Sonny demonstrates a renewed commitment to the art that has always been central to his existence. Yet, this moment is not without its complexities, as the narrator recognizes that "[Sonny] wasn't on much better terms with his life, not the life that stretched before him now" (Baldwin 147), than he had been when he stopped playing. This realization underscores that while the future is growing more tangible to Sonny, it does not live up to the dreams of his youth. The dissonance between Sonny's growing awareness of the future and his fading dreams is the catalyst for his transformative performance. In his silence, Sonny experienced a profound disconnection from the piano—a loss of the symbiosis that had once defined his being. As he confronts this loss, the act of playing again becomes more than a return

to music; it is a reclamation of his core essence. It signifies his determination to find meaning amid pain and uncertainty, even if the future no longer holds the idealized promise he once believed it did.

Sonny displays an ability to transcend the limitations of his reality through music and community, and this effect spreads to those who interact with him while in his element. When the narrator visits the nightclub, he sees it as “Sonny’s world. Or rather; his kingdom. [At the nightclub], it was not even a question that his veins bore royal blood” (Baldwin 145). Seeing the nightclub as a “kingdom” is an allegory for Sonny’s transcendental quality, and his “royal blood” elevates his identity in this setting, sharply contrasting his status as an addict and convict in the outside world. In the nightclub, Sonny’s identity flourishes as he becomes a figure of respect, admiration, and authority. Patrons laugh at his jokes and look forward to seeing him play, which provides an appreciation that Sonny does not receive outside of the nightclub. This setting allows him to escape the harsh judgments and suffering of his daily life and to assert his true self, which is deeply intertwined with his music. Through Sonny’s contrasting identities, Baldwin develops an allegory about the duality of human existence and the transformative power of art. The role that music plays in Sonny’s “kingdom” is that of an evolutionary power; the fluidity of his world, characterized by the improvisation of jazz, mirrors the complexities and nuances of the human experience. The idea of Sonny having “royal blood” further emphasizes the transformative power of this space. Whereas Sonny is seen as a flawed individual in the outside world, his struggles are recontextualized in the nightclub as fuel for his music. Moreover, Sonny’s role as a musician allows him to manipulate time and perception for those who enter his “kingdom.” In the nightclub, time becomes elastic, refracted through the emotional cadence of the music. Sonny invites the narrator—and by extension, the audience—into a reality shaped by his fluid

perception, where music becomes the language of connection and understanding. Through this allegory, Baldwin suggests that the elasticity of time that Sonny creates is a powerful tool for redefining identity.

During a pause in the performance, the narrator sends Sonny a Scotch and milk, a pairing that was once regarded as a drink for royalty and high society (Tasting Table). Reiterating Sonny's status as royalty within the nightclub, the drink represents the newfound respect the narrator feels for his brother after being invited into Sonny's world. This gesture also serves as a subtle acknowledgment of Sonny's artistry, positioning him as a kind of king in the realm of jazz, where his talent commands reverence. The drink's complex connotations mirror Sonny's own layered identity, shaped by both struggle and triumph. By sending it, the narrator not only bridges their emotional distance but also aligns himself with Sonny's world, showing his willingness to celebrate and honor his brother in his own way. After Sonny takes a sip, the narrator watches it "[glow] and [shake] above [his] brother's head like the very cup of trembling" (Baldwin 148). In the Bible, the Cup of Trembling represents God's judgment and eventual offer for salvation. By likening the Scotch and milk to the Cup of Trembling, Baldwin implies that Sonny provides a kind of salvation for those in his audience. The four great fears initially held in the Cup of Trembling could be translated to the 1950s in Harlem, and through the simile, Sonny has the power to hold these fears in a God-like way. Listening to Sonny's music is a form of prayer for the patrons of the nightclub, and by way of this prayer, Sonny assuages their four great fears. The first fear is the "*the daily personal fear of losing everything because of the chaotic world conditions*" (World Challenge), which existed because of racial tensions in the United States during the 1950s. The second fear is "*losing their children to the Babylonian spirit*" (World Challenge), or the potential for the younger generations to get lost in the appeal of drugs

and crime, like how Sonny fell into drug habits in his adolescence. Next, “*the awful calamities and terror taking place in the nations surrounding them*” (World Challenge), which was present in the continuing acts of segregation and racial violence in Southern states. Finally, the last fear was that “*there was no leader to guide them out of the chaos*” (World Challenge). Black Americans in Harlem were developing a community based around artistic and personal expression, but individuals were not united behind one leader. In response to this need, Sonny emerges as a beacon of expression, offering a unique form of guidance through his music. His performance becomes a sanctuary where the audience can confront their fears and find solace, much like a congregation in prayer. Sonny’s music transcends mere entertainment, serving as a spiritual experience that allows patrons to process their pain, find connection, and envision hope amidst their struggles. In this role, Sonny is not just an artist but also a leader of the soul, guiding his audience through the chaos of their shared reality. His ability to transform suffering into something beautiful gives the community a sense of purpose and a path toward healing.

Sonny’s performance embodies a collapse of time through which past experiences and future struggles are compressed into the present moment. As he plays, the narrator “[hears] what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth... he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever” (Baldwin 148). Through his music, Sonny makes time into a malleable force and reveals his formative moments to the narrator, signifying his acceptance of his own past and allowing the narrator to accept his past as well. This shared reckoning with the past fosters a profound connection between the brothers, as Sonny’s music becomes a vessel for understanding and reconciliation. Through the collapse of time, Sonny transforms his pain into a transcendent force, bridging the gap between his individual struggles and universal human experiences. His

performance not only illuminates his personal journey but also acts as a catalyst for the narrator's emotional growth, enabling him to see the depth of Sonny's resilience and artistry. In this way, Sonny's music becomes a profound expression of survival, redemption, and the enduring power of shared humanity. The collapse of time evoked by Sonny's music also gives the narrator insight into his ancestral struggles. During the performance, the narrator "saw [his] mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died" (Baldwin 148). This moment signifies the narrator's growing understanding of the value of strife; the first-hand experience of his parents' suffering provides a perspective into what one will do for a chance at success. Sonny's music acts as a parable of this struggle, illustrating how hardship can be transmuted into something meaningful and beautiful. Through his music, Sonny encapsulates the enduring human spirit, turning personal and generational suffering into art that resonates with his audience. His ability to channel anguish into melody serves as a metaphor for the resilience exhibited by his parents and the redemption he hopes to achieve through music. Sonny's journey mirrors the collective story of their family and community—overcoming adversity while grappling with internal and external challenges. His music, much like a parable, offers both a moral lesson and a cathartic release, teaching the narrator that understanding and acceptance of pain are integral to growth and connection. In this way, Sonny's performance is not merely a personal expression but a universal narrative of survival and hope.

In *Sonny's Blues*, James Baldwin explores time as a dynamic and transformative force that bridges the gaps between identity, relationships, and generational trauma. Through Sonny's climactic performance in the nightclub, Baldwin collapses temporal boundaries, revealing how personal and ancestral struggles intertwine to shape the present. Sonny's music transcends mere

artistic expression, becoming a parable of survival, resilience, and redemption that resonates with both the narrator and the audience. As time bends and refracts through Sonny's performance, it allows for emotional reconciliation, offering the narrator a greater understanding of his brother's pain and the broader human condition. Baldwin's nuanced depiction of time underscores its role in healing, connection, and the evolution of identity, ultimately presenting art as a powerful medium for transforming suffering into meaning and hope. Through this timeless narrative, Baldwin not only explores the complexities of family and community but also invites readers to reflect on the enduring strength of the human spirit.

Works Cited

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