Sonny's Blues

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BALDWIN

Baldwin was born in 1924 in the New York neighborhood of Harlem. He was raised by his mother and step-father, a Baptist minister who abused and ridiculed him. This abuse, as well as the persistent racism Baldwin experienced while growing up, had a deep influence on his writing. At 19, Baldwin began devoting himself seriously to writing, publishing essays and short stories whose success led him to move to Paris in 1948 on a fellowship. Baldwin would revisit Europe throughout his life, citing its importance in giving him perspective on his experiences in America and liberating him to write about controversial American themes. Though Baldwin is best known as a novelist and essayist, he was also a playwright, a poet, a critic, and a writer of short stories. Baldwin, the grandson of a slave, was a prolific voice of the civil rights movement due to the overriding concern in his stories and essays with racism in America. Openly gay, he was also known for his frank treatment of taboo subjects like homosexuality and interracial relationships. Widely considered to be one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century, Baldwin's influence lives on in writers like Toni Morrison and Joan Didion.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Sonny's Blues" takes place in 1950s Harlem, a New York neighborhood known as the center of urban black life in America at the time. Between the 1920s and 1950s, African Americans began moving northward in what was called the Great Migration, a mass relocation in order to escape the Jim Crow South and seek economic opportunity. In the decades prior to "Sonny's Blues," Harlem transformed into an almost entirely African American neighborhood, and it was particularly known for the period of artistic prosperity in the 1920s known as the Harlem Renaissance. In addition to its rich culture, Harlem was known to be a place of vice, poverty, and violence. This is reflected in "Sonny's Blues"—for example, the notoriously poor housing conditions in Harlem led to the construction of many of the housing projects that Baldwin mentions in the story. Harlem was also a destination for jazz performers with its popular and storied venues, such as the Cotton Club, although by the 1950s many jazz venues had migrated downtown, as "Sonny's Blues" suggests.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of James Baldwin's other literary works deal with themes similar to those in "Sonny's Blues," particularly his semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. Richard Wright, a friend of Baldwin's, also wrote of the lives of young urban black men in the mid-twentieth century in *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, and Ralph Ellison likewise did so in *Invisible Man*. Other writers who have incorporated meditations on African American music into their work include Ishmael Reed, Langston Hughes, Albert Murray, Jean Toomer, and even Jack Kerouac. Throughout his life, Baldwin frequently cited the importance of Henry James on his writing. James, another American writing abroad, shared Baldwin's concern with people whose identity was at odds with the predominant culture around them.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Sonny's Blues
- **When Written:** 1957
- **Where Written:** Paris
- **When Published:** 1957 originally, and then in the collection *Going to Meet the Man* in 1965
- **Literary Period:** 20th Century African American Literature
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Harlem, New York, USA
- **Climax:** The ending, in which the narrator listens to Sonny play at the jazz club
- **Antagonist:** Drugs, Racism
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Preaching Potential. At age 14 Baldwin became a devoted member of a Pentecostal church, eventually becoming a wildly popular Junior Minister. While he lost his faith at 17, he viewed his time in the church as an important step in overcoming some of the difficulties of his personal life, like his abusive stepfather. Much of Baldwin's work is inflected with Biblical imagery and allusion.

Activism and Fame. Baldwin was a nonviolent civil rights activist who wrote prolifically about racism in the United States, and who allied himself with civil rights organizations like the influential Congress on Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In 1963, Baldwin was on the cover of *Time* for his importance in bringing to life the experiences of African Americans living with racism, and his unique ability to illuminate the ideas of civil rights to white and black audiences alike.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story opens on the unnamed narrator, who has just read in the newspaper that his little brother Sonny was arrested for using and selling heroin. Throughout his day, he cannot think of anything else. He's a high school algebra teacher, and he looks at his young students, wondering which ones are, like Sonny, turning to drugs to escape the suffering of their lives as young black men in Harlem.

The narrator runs into an old friend of Sonny's—a drug user—on the way to the subway, and their conversation makes the narrator understand how hard prison will be for Sonny. Still, the narrator says he doesn't plan to do anything to help Sonny, though he gives Sonny's friend money when he asks.

The story jumps ahead to months later, when the narrator's young daughter Grace has just died of polio and the narrator finally, in his grief, decides to write to Sonny in jail. Sonny replies that he needed to hear from his brother, but didn't want to reach out first because he knows the pain he has caused. The two strike up a correspondence, and when Sonny is released from jail he comes to live with the narrator's family in Harlem.

Having Sonny around seems to trigger the narrator's memories of his childhood, and the story jumps back in time. The narrator recalls that right after his father died, his mother made him promise not to let anything happen to Sonny. The narrator didn't understand her worry, so she told him about how his father had watched his brother (a musician, like Sonny) get run over by a car of drunk white men. The narrator's mother reminds him that he has a brother too, and the world hasn't changed.

When the narrator's mother dies soon after, he gets a furlough from the army to attend the funeral. The narrator is married to a woman named Isabel, and he arranges for teenaged Sonny to go live with Isabel's parents until he finishes school. During this visit he has a conversation in which Sonny reveals his desire to be a jazz musician, and the narrator discourages him harshly. Living with the narrator's wife's family, Sonny plays their piano day and night. Eventually, after the family learns he hasn't been going to school, Sonny joins the navy and leaves without saying goodbye. The next time the narrator sees Sonny is after the war. Sonny is living downtown with a group of musicians. The narrator and Sonny have a horrible fight, and they don't speak again until the narrator writes to Sonny in jail.

The story then returns to the present, when Sonny has been living with the narrator for two weeks. The narrator is home alone watching a revival meeting across the street, and he sees Sonny at the edge of the crowd listening to them sing. Sonny comes upstairs and invites the narrator to hear him play in the Village that night. The narrator agrees to come, and they discuss the woman singing across the street at the revival meeting. It triggers a conversation about the intensity of suffering, and how drugs and music can be an escape from it, a way not to be shaken to pieces by the world. Sonny reminds the narrator that, while he is clean now, his troubles aren't necessarily over, and the narrator silently promises to always be there for Sonny.

The two of them go to the nightclub, and the narrator is surprised by how admired and beloved Sonny is by everyone there—Sonny has his own world that the narrator doesn't know anything about. Sonny and his band begin to play, and the narrator thinks about how rare it is to have an experience where music touches you. That leads him to reflect on how difficult it must be to play music, to have to impose order on all the rage and delight and confusion inside of people. Sonny seems to struggle at first to really put himself into the music, but eventually Sonny hits his stride and the narrator, listening from a corner, tears up thinking about suffering: his own, Sonny's, their parents, and the suffering in the world around them. He realizes that music is telling everyone's story, and that it's a gift to strive to tell it anew in a way that will make an audience listen and make them confront their demons in a way that makes them feel less alone.

When the band pauses, the narrator buys Sonny a drink and the bartender puts the glass on top of his piano. Sonny sips it, meets eyes with the narrator, and returns to playing. The narrator watches the glass shake sitting on the piano above Sonny's head, comparing it to "the very **cup of trembling**."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The first-person narrator of "Sonny's Blues" is a high school math teacher in Harlem. As the story begins, he has to decide how to handle his brother Sonny's trouble with addiction. The narrator is acutely aware of the drugs, violence, and lack of opportunity that pervade his neighborhood, and he has spent his whole life fighting to avoid meeting the fate of those around him. He has a good job, he's married with children, and he seems devoted to living an orderly and upstanding life—a devotion that has paradoxically served to make him bitter and obsessed with the very suffering he's trying to avoid. The narrator has a complex relationship to family. While he has crafted a traditional and loving family for himself, his relationship to his brother Sonny is fraught, and he feels guilty that he has watched Sonny suffer without intervening, as he promised his late mother that he would. Over the course of the story, as the narrator is forced to grapple more with the suffering of others, his relationship to Sonny improves and he becomes a warmer and more compassionate character.

Sonny – Sonny is the narrator's brother. He's a jazz musician and a heroin addict who lived a bohemian life in New York prior

to being arrested for his drug abuse and sent to jail. Sonny is passionate, freethinking, and not particularly responsible. As his strained relationship to the narrator recovers over the course of the story, Sonny is able to stay off of drugs and begin to rebuild his life. While Baldwin does not maintain complete optimism about Sonny's odds of beating his addiction, Sonny does manage to bring joy into the narrator's family, and his music allows the narrator to begin to acknowledge his own suffering, a crucial development in mitigating the misery that the narrator feels about his regimented and fearful life.

The Narrator's Mother — The narrator's mother is not alive in "Sonny's Blues," but the narrator remembers her at length in the middle of the story. She is described as a wise and caring woman who took on the problems and sorrows of her family; this is best shown when she tells the narrator about his father's troubles, and admits that she was the only one he ever talked to about it. Significantly, the narrator's mother also makes the narrator promise her that he will keep Sonny out of trouble and always be there for him. This shows her great insight into her sons and her deep caring for them; the promise ultimately helps not only Sonny, but also the narrator, because it keeps him from allowing his strained relationship with Sonny to persist and forces him to become more compassionate.

The Narrator's Father — The narrator's father is also not alive in "Sonny's Blues," but through the narrator's memories of him and his mother's stories about him, Baldwin gives a glimpse of who he was. The narrator's father is described as someone who could be hopeful and caring, but was also plagued by despair—he drank on weekends, eventually drinking himself to death. Though the narrator never knew this while his father was alive, the source of the narrator's father's torment was having witnessed the death of his own brother when a car of drunk white men ran him over on purpose. The narrator's father suffered deeply from this event, but kept his suffering private, preferring to handle it by drinking and only confessing his feelings to his wife.

The Narrator's Father's Brother — The narrator's father's brother only appears in "Sonny's Blues" through the narrator's memory of a story his mother told him, but nonetheless he is a consequential character because his death is at the center of much of their familial pain. The narrator's mother describes the narrator's uncle as a man somewhat similar to Sonny—he was a musician and enjoyed a reckless and bohemian social life. He died when, while walking home from a concert with the narrator's father, a car of drunk racists ran him over. The death broke the narrator's father's heart, leading the narrator's father to repress his sorrow, which set an example for the narrator to do the same.

Isabel — Isabel is the narrator's wife. She is shown to be a kind and understanding person who is happy to take Sonny into their family, despite his troubles. Isabel's great sorrow was witnessing the agonizing death of their daughter Grace, and she often cries to the narrator about it at night or wakes up with nightmares. Despite having experienced the traumatic loss of a child, she and the narrator seem to have a kind and loving marriage.

The Narrator's Sons — The narrator's sons are most frequently invoked in the story to demonstrate the destructive potential of Harlem. The narrator worries constantly that these kind and good-natured boys will become corrupted by the drugs, violence, and rage of Harlem. Otherwise, nearly all that is conveyed about the boys is that they are welcoming to Sonny and they treat him well.

Creole — Creole is the leader of the band Sonny plays with at the jazz club. He is older than Sonny and the narrator, and clearly an experienced musician—the narrator realizes quickly when they start playing that Creole is in control of everything that is happening onstage. Creole is shown to be a compassionate guide to Sonny as he navigates his first performance after his time in jail. Sonny struggles to play at first, and it is Creole's firm guidance and trust that finally pushes Sonny into playing his best.

Isabel's Parents — All Baldwin tells us about Isabel's parents is that they didn't approve of the narrator marrying their daughter, and yet they took in teenaged, orphaned Sonny anyway for the narrator's sake. It's a kindness that's not straightforward; while taking Sonny in is obviously generous, they don't make him feel terribly welcome, which leads him to flee.

Sonny's Friend — Sonny's friend is, like Sonny, an addict in Harlem. The narrator recognizes him because he's always on the streets asking for money. At the beginning of the story, Sonny's friend tracks down the narrator to tell him about Sonny's arrest, and in the course of their conversation Sonny's friend is able to elicit compassion from the narrator for Sonny's plight, even though it doesn't inspire him to reach out to Sonny in jail.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Grace — Grace is the narrator's youngest child who died of polio at the age of two. The grief that her death causes in the narrator is what makes him finally able to step outside of himself and consider Sonny's suffering, leading him to repair their relationship.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CYCLES OF SUFFERING

The central concern of "Sonny's Blues" is suffering: Baldwin emphasizes that suffering is universal, and that it is also cyclical—that suffering tends to lead to more suffering. Baldwin demonstrates the effects of suffering on several different scales: he shows the way suffering affects an individual life, the way it affects a family throughout generations, and the way it affects a society overall.

The story—set in 1950s Harlem, a New York neighborhood that was then at the center of urban black life—is particularly concerned with the difficult lives that await young black men in America. This is shown through the narrator's reflections on the sad futures that his high school students face (lives of drugs, violence, and rage at having "their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities"), as well as the narrator's and Sonny's difficulty leaving Harlem despite their desire to get out. Baldwin shows that suffering is a central component of the African American experience, and Harlem is portrayed as a trap—a place of violence and suffering that, because of the trauma and racism its residents experience, is nearly impossible to escape.

Throughout the course of the story, Baldwin also reveals the parallel suffering occurring in the lives of different members of the narrator's family, which emphasizes the echoes between the sufferings of previous generations and the suffering of the present. For instance, the narrator's father's despair over having watched his brother die mirrors the narrator's own guilt and sadness about his failure to help Sonny with his addiction. Baldwin is not optimistic, either, about the next generation—the narrator, despite his becoming a schoolteacher, has not been able to provide better opportunities for his own children. They live in a rundown housing project and his daughter died an agonizing death of polio. He worries that his sons, like Sonny, will fall into the drugs that are everywhere on the streets of their neighborhood. This suggests that suffering is passed down generationally.

"Sonny's Blues" also explores the ways that individual suffering ruins lives, particularly due to people's reticence or inability to talk about their suffering. Baldwin shows how private suffering turns people bitter, estranges relationships, and even leads people to illness, addiction, or death. This is revealed most poignantly through the narrator who, at first glance, seems to be living a better life than Sonny. As the story progresses, however, we begin to understand the magnitude of the narrator's anger, bitterness, and fear—he seems obsessed with avoiding the suffering that has plagued his family and community, but that obsession has effectively meant that he is fixated on suffering in a way that makes him miserable. While Sonny is more able to speak of his suffering than the narrator, he too seems to have been overwhelmed by suffering, which led him to addiction (itself a microcosm of self-perpetuating suffering), legal trouble, and temporary estrangement from his brother.

Baldwin does not promise an easy escape to such overwhelming suffering, but he does give hints that the burden of these cycles of suffering can be lessened. The narrator's epiphany at the jazz club shows the importance of expressing suffering in order to take control of it, and Sonny's friendships with musicians show how creating community can bring relief.

FAMILY BONDS

In "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin asks how much family members owe to one another, and he examines the fallout when familial compassion fails and obligations are only halfheartedly met. The most explicit example of this is the narrator's failure for most of the story to live up to his promise to his mother that he would always be there for Sonny. Another example of a halfheartedly met family obligation is when the narrator's wife's family takes orphaned Sonny in, but makes it clear that they only did so because it was proper, not because they had compassion for Sonny's predicament. Both of these instances of familial indifference compounded Sonny's problems and fueled his despair, showing the power of family to grievously harm.

However, while familial cruelty or indifference propels the plot of "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin resolves the story by exploring how much more complex a family obligation is than it can initially appear. He suggests that family obligations, when met with real compassion, are mutually rewarding. The possibilities of a family relationship built on compassion emerge most clearly through the narrator's growth once Sonny moves in with his family. At first, the narrator believes that he has been asked to care for Sonny because he is the more stable brother—he thinks that he has something to give Sonny, but nothing to gain by helping him. As the story progresses, however, and the narrator becomes open to understanding and accepting who Sonny is, the narrator begins to absolve himself of the guilt of having failed both his brother and mother. Also, more importantly, it becomes clear that Sonny's music is an antidote to the bitterness and hopelessness that the narrator feels. Sonny and the narrator need one another—Sonny needs compassion and a place to stay, while the narrator needs a model of somebody who is striving for joy in spite of the suffering all around them. Their bond, then, is mutually beneficial.

It's possible to see this complexity, too, in the narrator's promise to his mother, a promise she forced him to make. The narrator's mother sees this promise as a corrective to the previous generation's tragedy, in which the narrator's father failed to protect his own brother from a senseless and violent death. The narrator's mother was the only person who saw the extent of her husband's suffering afterwards, and, while the promise appears at first to be for Sonny's benefit, it could also be seen as the mother's attempt to spare the narrator a grief

similar to his father's. Overall, the story suggests that, while it is tempting to view family relationships and obligations as straightforward and even transactional, showing real compassion for family can offer surprising rewards, including the relief of a person's most intractable suffering.

PASSION, RESTRAINT, AND CONTROL

The narrator and Sonny, as black men in America, live in a world that tries to control them. They also live in a world that seems completely overwhelming because it is so saturated with suffering. Baldwin sets up the two brothers as being emblematic of two diverging responses to this pervasive suffering. One chooses a life of passion, idolizing artistic expression and casting aside a traditional life in order to find meaning, and the other is scrupulous about being responsible and living an orderly life. Both of these lifestyles are, in essence, an attempt to control the suffering they face. Baldwin does not propose that one of these modes of living is better than the other—each is shown to have severe drawbacks—nor does he suggest that suffering can ever be fully controlled, but he does show that the brothers can help one another by sharing the strengths that each mode of coping with suffering provides.

The narrator, who is the older of the brothers, is shown as living a life devoted to responsibility and rational decision making. He joins the army, gets married, has a family, works as a high school math teacher, and is all the while in a simmering rage that his choices have not led him to a better life than the one he grew up with, and that his sacrifices will not provide better opportunities for his children than the ones he had. Baldwin shows that, paradoxically, the narrator's obsession with choosing a path that would lead him away from suffering has actually *caused* him to suffer because he has not prioritized finding joy or meaning in his life.

Sonny, the younger brother, has known since he was little that he loved music, and he decides to make a life of it because, as far as he is concerned, "people *ought* to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?" Sonny's pursuit of music leads him to not graduate from high school and to keep the company of people who lead him to drug use, which derails his life and lands him in prison. While Sonny is certainly the brother whose life seems, on the surface, more dominated by suffering (addiction, jail, having nowhere to go), he also is able to channel that suffering into something beautiful through his music.

Since suffering has led both brothers to lives that are, in some way, incomplete or unsustainable, Baldwin shows that they need one another. Sonny's devotion to his passion means that he relies on the fruits of the narrator's restraint—his home, family, and money—in order to start rebuilding his life. The narrator, though, also needs to be close to Sonny's passion in order to bring joy and relief into his life that has been, so far, consumed by rage and bitterness. At the end of the story, Baldwin gives readers a glimpse of how the blending of their lifestyles gives them new ways to see the control they crave. Music, the narrator begins to understand, is a way to impose order and even beauty on emotions that are **dark** and often incomprehensible. To listen to Sonny's music liberates the narrator from his excruciating need to control all of the darkness in his world by suppressing his emotions. Music helps him understand that his feelings about suffering, while terrible, can also be an opportunity to access community and compassion.

SALVATION AND RELIEF

Each of the characters in "Sonny's Blues" is living a life that is, in some way, governed by suffering, but it is the significant instances of salvation and relief that prevent "Sonny's Blues" from being utterly hopeless and tragic. Salvation and relief come in many forms in the story, some better than others, but it is the final invocation of the "**cup of trembling**" (a quote from the Biblical Book of Isaiah) that suggests a relief from suffering that might endure.

Sonny's drug use is one way of finding relief from suffering. He describes the feeling of heroin as something that makes him feel "distant" and "in control," the latter being a feeling that "you've got to have" sometimes. Sonny, then, has turned to drugs in order to escape the feeling that the suffering in his life is not within his control. His drug use, of course, ultimately compounds his suffering instead of allowing him to escape it.

Sonny's music is a more complex example of relief from suffering. While the narrator initially considers music to be a way for Sonny to shirk his responsibilities, he ultimately realizes that Sonny's music fuels his life; it's a way for him to make his suffering meaningful, and without it he would likely succumb to despair. In the passage in which the narrator listens to Sonny play at the bar, Baldwin makes clear that Sonny's music is never separate from his suffering; playing piano is not an instance of pure joy in a horrible world, but rather an art that allows Sonny to make sense of suffering and turn it into something beautiful. This then lets him communicate with others and make people feel less alone. While listening to Sonny, the narrator realizes that music has the power to "help us to be free," in his case because it helps him, for the first time, acknowledge his own sadness.

The final sentence of "Sonny's Blues" describes a glass of milk and scotch that the narrator has given his brother. Baldwin writes, "it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling." This references a Bible passage that describes God taking suffering away from humanity: "I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling…; thou shalt no more drink it again." The story's ending is ambiguous, but it certainly suggests that Sonny's music has taken suffering—at least temporarily—from both Sonny and the narrator. This is a complicated image, because it is both optimistic and

precarious—the cup, like the relief it symbolizes, seems like it might be about to topple. The story has painted a detailed and explicit picture of the magnitude of suffering in Harlem, and Baldwin isn't asking the reader to accept that music will cure it. However, this final moment suggests a way forward; music can take suffering and make it meaningful. In other words, it can't cure suffering, but it can make the burdens of suffering easier to bear.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CUP OF TREMBLING

At the end of the story the narrator has had an epiphany due to Sonny's music, and Baldwin introduces a symbol—"the cup of trembling"—to encapsulate the moment. This image is about salvation, and it comes from the Book of Isaiah in the Bible: the Lord says, "Behold, I have taken out of thine handthe cup of trembling, even the dregs ofthe cupof my fury; thou shalt no more drink it again." In a story that is so concerned with suffering, the cup of trembling signifies a moment in which God took suffering away, much like music has decreased Sonny's and the narrator's sufferings. Though the symbol seems to appear out of nowhere, there are echoes of it throughout the story: for instance, Baldwin consistently describes people who have succumbed to the dangers of Harlem as "shaken to pieces." It's the trembling of rage, addiction, and despair that this cup takes away, and Baldwin's use of the symbol is therefore clearly optimistic, but not wholeheartedly so. The cup is described as shaking above Sonny's head, which seems a precarious and threatening position—it's as though the whole endeavor could collapse and harm him, much like he could relapse into his old lifestyle of drug use. The future is uncertain for these characters, but the cup of trembling confirms that, through music, they've both found a way to relieve themselves, at least for a moment, from the suffering in which they're immersed.

DARKNESS

Throughout the story, Baldwin uses imagery of darkness to signal the dangers and traumas of growing up black in Harlem. This begins early on; in the first paragraph, when the narrator is reeling from the news of Sonny's arrest, his face is "trapped in the darkness which roared outside." From then on, Baldwin's mentions of darkness are always significant—they come at times of fear, despair, and hopelessness. Important instances of Baldwin dwelling on darkness include the narrator's meditation on the futures of his algebra students ("All they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness…"), the darkness of the night in which the narrator's father's brother was killed, and the darkness that surrounds the living room in the narrator's memory of being a child in a room of adult conversation. In both of these instances, darkness is a menace. Baldwin also (less frequently) uses light to symbolize the opposite of darkness. In moments of optimism, Baldwin will describe light on people's faces, and at the jazz club the narrator observes that music is "the only light we've got in all this darkness." The opposition of light and dark is, of course, Biblical—there's the pervasive danger of falling into evil and despair, but also the insistent hope of salvation, symbolized by the light.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Sonny's Blues and Other Stories* published in 1995.

Sonny's Blues Quotes

❝ These boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Sonny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator has just learned that his brother Sonny has been arrested for using and selling heroin. Here, the narrator is sadly contemplating the similarities between the lives of his high school algebra students and his and Sonny's childhood. By drawing this parallel, the narrator is showing that the same social conditions force each generation into lives of suffering. This is an indictment of the consequences of racism, which limits the possibilities of African Americans, and it is also an indication that there hasn't been much improvement over time ("Sonny's Blues" was published in 1957, when the civil rights movement was in its infancy). The narrator's outlook is one of doom—everyone experiences the same hardship, many (like Sonny) are consumed by their suffering, and there's no cause to hope for the future either. While the narrator is still not empathetic towards Sonny's plight, his ability to see

that Sonny's trouble with drugs has to do with the hardships he has faced is, at least, a step towards understanding him. This is an early example of near-empathy from a generally un-empathetic character.

> I certainly didn't want to know how it felt. It filled everything, the people, the houses, the music, the dark, quicksilver barmaid, with menace; and this menace was their reality.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing Sonny's friend's admission of guilt over having once told Sonny how good heroin felt, the narrator sees the world as being filled with menace. This seems to be due to the fact that the friend's comment is doubly painful to hear: it stokes the narrator's own guilt about not having helped Sonny, and it reminds him of the pervasiveness of the drugs that he hates. It's significant that the narrator's strategy for coping with difficult things is to not want to hear about them or engage with them. His life is built on a commitment to keeping suffering at bay through order and righteousness, so any attempt to reckon with a reality that he doesn't like makes him feel threatened. This is also a moment in which the narrator could exercise empathy; he and Sonny's friend share a sense of guilt about Sonny's fate that could allow them to connect, but the narrator does not allow for this, instead deflecting his feelings into general observations of gloom. Over the course of the story, this attitude will be challenged and, eventually, overcome.

> I feel like a man who's been trying to climb up out of some deep, real deep and funky hole and just saw the sun up there, outside. I got to get outside.

Related Characters: Sonny (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears in the first letter that Sonny writes to the narrator from prison. In it, he describes his awful suffering, which makes the narrator feel guilty that he didn't reach out to his brother sooner. The image of the hole that Sonny sees himself climbing out of evokes the difficulty of overcoming addiction—once in the thralls of a drug habit, it's very hard to break the cycle and return to normalcy (or, metaphorically, climb out of the hole). However, Sonny's assertion that he finally sees the sunshine and wants to get out of the hole suggests that he does see a pathway to a better life. The language Sonny uses to talk about this also echoes Baldwin's overarching use of darkness to symbolize suffering and light to symbolize the possibility of salvation. Here, salvation (recovery from drug addiction) is uncertain—it's on the horizon, but there's not a clear path to it. In reading this letter, the narrator realizes that Sonny needs his help, and that he could make the difference between Sonny staying in the hole and getting out.

> When I saw him many things I thought I had forgotten came flooding back to me. This was because I had begun, finally, to wonder about Sonny, about the life that Sonny lived inside.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Sonny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator has just picked Sonny up from prison and is seeing him for the first time in many years. As we saw in the narrator's encounter with Sonny's friend, the narrator tends to lack curiosity about experiences that don't fit with his ordered and respectable life. This tendency to shut out unpleasantness has made the narrator un-empathetic, because it precludes him from wanting to understand Sonny's (or anybody else's) troubles. In this moment, however, the narrator has finally begun to feel some curiosity about Sonny that will eventually morph into empathy. It's significant that, upon feeling this curiosity, memories of the narrator's that he hasn't thought of in years are unlocked. This hints at the personal toll that the narrator's rigidity and guardedness have taken on him. Though he sees his orderly life as protecting him from the suffering around him, it has also prevented him from

grappling with the suffering—particularly in the form of painful memories—that he carries within himself.

> Boys exactly like the boys we once had been found themselves smothering in these houses, came down into the streets for light and air and found themselves encircled by disaster. Some escaped the trap, most didn't. Those who got out always left something of themselves behind.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Sonny

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when the narrator has picked up Sonny from jail and they are in a taxi driving through Harlem, the neighborhood where they grew up. Sonny hasn't been back to Harlem in years, and, as a result, the narrator is seeing his home anew—and not favorably. Here, the narrator remembers how problems at home led him and Sonny to the streets, where even worse problems awaited them: in other words, suffering led to greater suffering. The gloom of this is compounded by the narrator drawing a parallel between his generation and the new generation. Things haven't improved for young black men, as the same sufferings that led to Sonny's current condition are still overtaking Harlem's youth.

While the narrator and Sonny have, in their own ways, escaped Harlem (Sonny doesn't live there anymore, and the narrator has a respectable job that has spared him the fate of many of Harlem's residents), the narrator reflects that even those who got away—presumably like himself and Sonny—are still, in some way, trapped in Harlem. This alludes to the extent to which Sonny and the narrator's childhoods still haunt them and, perhaps, always will.

> The moment Sonny and I started into the house I had the feeling that I was simply bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Sonny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

The house they're entering is one of the housing projects that the narrator has just described in near-apocalyptic terms ("like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea"). The housing project is run-down and full of all the suffering and vice (including drugs) that led Sonny astray as a young man. While the narrator sees himself as someone whose commitment to hard work and respectability has allowed him to escape suffering, he realizes in this passage that, despite the life he has lived and the commitments he has made, he can't provide a safe place for his children and his brother to live, and that makes him feel guilty. The narrator, despite all of his sacrifices, is still up against the same problems as always (Sonny is still an addict living in a place where drugs are readily available), and this emphasizes the tendency of suffering to replicate itself. It also illuminates the logic of the narrator's pessimism; he doesn't have much reason to hope that things will turn out better for Sonny this time.

> You can see the darkness growing against the windowpanes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it's real quiet in the room. For a moment nobody's talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside…Everyone is looking at something a child can't see.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator takes the story back in time through a series of recollections. At this moment he is generally recalling the state of being a child in a room full of adults as dusk is closing in. This is his memory, but also one that stands in for all the children of Harlem. While there is no explicit menace mentioned in this passage, Baldwin's focus on darkness signals to the reader that he is invoking suffering or fear; his observation that "every face looks darkening" indicates that, though the child doesn't understand, all the adults are thinking about the sufferings

they have endured. The imagery, too, of the darkness "growing against the windowpanes" shows the fragility of the home as a bulwark against despair. While the darkness is thickest out on the street, that darkness has permeated the room, too, in the form of the shadows crossing everyone's faces. This passage shows that, despite the child's innocence and inability to understand the specifics of the adults' memories, the child is still raised in an environment permeated by darkness. Suffering is a baseline condition—one so pervasive that it becomes the atmosphere of the room. Baldwin is suggesting here that nobody can grow up in that environment and be unaffected by the suffering around them.

> The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frightens the child obscurely....The darkness outside is what the old folks have been talking about. It's what they've come from. It's what they endure. The child knows that they won't talk anymore because if he knows too much about what's happened to *them*, he'll know too much too soon, about what's going to happen to *him*.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is also part of the narrator's reverie about being the lone child in a room full of adults in Harlem, but this passage focuses more specifically on the effects of silence. The darkness, which symbolizes suffering, is frightening to the child, but even more so because of the silence with which it is greeted. The child understands enough to know that the adults won't talk about suffering around him because that will give him something specific to fear, but the silence actually increases his fear because it means that he has the liberty to imagine the terrors that might await him. This poisonous effect of silence is echoed throughout the story—in the narrator's long silence with Sonny, for example, or in his father's silence about his brother who died. Both of these silences, like the silence described in this quote, are meant to be protective of the self or of a family member, but each of them does more harm than good (the narrator's silence hurts Sonny and himself, and the father's silence makes him suffer privately and prevents the family from understanding the mood of their house). This passage suggests the importance of open communication in families—communication, compassion, and empathy are central to the family bond, and even to the prevention of future suffering.

> "He says he never in his life seen anything as dark as that road after the lights of that car had gone away."

Related Characters: The Narrator's Mother (speaker), The Narrator's Father's Brother, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, the narrator's mother is telling the story of how the narrator's father's brother died on a dark road when a car of drunk white racists ran him over. This was a turning point in the narrator's father's life—his guilt and despair over having watched his brother die led him to a life of drinking and suffering privately. This is one of the most concrete uses of darkness as a symbol for suffering. While the narrator's mother has told us that the road was not literally totally dark (there was a bright moon that night), the narrator's father's statement that he had never seen anything as dark as that road shows that what he actually meant is that this was the beginning of his greatest suffering. This passage is meant to echo the relationship between the narrator and Sonny, showing the guilt and sorrow that arises when one brother fails another.

> "I ain't telling you all this," she said, "to make you scared or bitter or to make you hate nobody. I'm telling you this because you got a brother. And the world ain't changed."

Related Characters: The Narrator's Mother (speaker), Sonny, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes just after the narrator's mother has finished telling the story of the narrator's father's brother's death. Here, she makes explicit that she told the story not simply to illuminate the private suffering that structured the narrator's father's life, but also as an instructive tale for the narrator, whose own little brother (Sonny) might someday need to be protected. Her cautions to the narrator—that she's not telling this to make him scared, bitter, or hateful—show her wisdom and understanding of her son's nature. Indeed, the narrator's personality—his fixation on suffering and his bitterness in the face of the hardship around him—meant that this was precisely how he did react to this story. Learning of his family's suffering strengthened his conviction that he should shut suffering out. His reaction to the story ends up clouding his ability to understand Sonny's desire to be a musician, because the narrator is so scared that music will lead to Sonny suffering.

"You got to hold on to your brother," she said, "and don't let him fall, no matter what it looks like is happening to him and no matter how evil you gets with him. You going to be evil with him many a time. But don't you forget what I told you, you hear?...You may not be able to stop nothing from happening. But you got to let him know you's *there*."

Related Characters: The Narrator's Mother (speaker), Sonny, The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is how the narrator's mother ends her telling of the story of the narrator's father's brother's death—by requiring the narrator to promise to protect and be there for Sonny no matter how badly the narrator might treat Sonny and no matter what happens in Sonny's life. It's a sweeping promise that the narrator does make, and its wisdom becomes apparent as the story progresses. The narrator's mother anticipates Sonny's troubles, the narrator's initial reaction to them, and, more subtly, that her promise might (by forcing the narrator to continue his relationship with Sonny) spare him from the bitterness and sorrow that afflicted her husband. In other words, this promise appears to be for the benefit of Sonny, but it ultimately benefits the narrator just as much because it requires him to repair their relationship, which soothes his guilt and gives him tools—Sonny's music—to confront and assuage his own suffering.

I had never thought about it before, had never been forced to, but I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called "good-time people."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Sonny, The Narrator's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs just after the narrator's mother dies, when the narrator is confronting teenaged Sonny about his future plans. He is dismayed when Sonny admits he wants to be a jazz musician, and one of the reasons is that it's an occupation that the narrator believes his father would have looked down on. While it's not clear that it's true that his father would have thought this, the quote sheds significant light on the narrator's character. He's someone devoted to responsibility and respectability, and, for that reason, one of the worst things someone could be is "good-time people." His dismissal of jazz musicians as "good-time people" shows that part of his objection to Sonny's chosen occupation is his belief that Sonny is shirking responsibility and choosing an unserious life. While the narrator's concern about Sonny's financial stability is certainly genuine, the narrator also shows that he profoundly misunderstands the nature of Sonny's passion. Being a jazz musician is not something he does for a "good time"—it's something he feels that he has to do in order to confront and relieve his suffering. It's a serious occupation that can bring joy and relief to Sonny and to those around him, but the narrator's rigidity and prejudices mean that he cannot see this.

"I can make a living at it. But what I don't seem to be able to make you understand is that it's the only thing I want to do."
"Well, Sonny," I said, gently, "you know people can't always do exactly what they *want* to do—"
"*No*, I don't know that," said Sonny, surprising me. "I think people *ought* to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?"

Related Characters: Sonny, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange comes during the conversation between Sonny and the narrator, in which they are discussing Sonny's future career, and it makes plain the stark differences between the brothers' personalities. Sonny wants to be a jazz musician because he can't imagine doing anything else. He's passionate about music and feels that he should live for his passion. The narrator, by contrast, makes responsible choices—getting married, joining the army, becoming a high school teacher—but he never gives the sense that any of it (except his marriage) is actually fulfilling or brings him joy. Seeking joy and passion isn't important to him, because he believes that it's by making responsible choices that people keep themselves from suffering. To Sonny, it's following the things that make you joyful that makes life worth living. More than any other, it's this exchange that illuminates the source of the narrator's bitterness. He truly doesn't understand the importance of passion, and has never made an effort to make himself truly happy. It also foreshadows Sonny's troubles—Sonny's belief that people should do what they want to do ultimately extends to drug use. In this way, this exchange also shows what the brothers have to offer one another. The narrator can stabilize Sonny's bohemian existence, and Sonny can show the narrator the importance of passion and joy.

> "Look, brother. I don't want to stay in Harlem no more, I really don't." He was very earnest. He looked at me, then over towards the kitchen window. There was something in his eyes I'd never seen before, some thoughtfulness, some worry all his own. He rubbed the muscle of one arm. "It's time I was getting out of here."

Related Characters: The Narrator, Sonny (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, part of the conversation that the narrator and Sonny have about Sonny's future, comes once the narrator has told Sonny that he has to with Isabel's parents until he finishes school. Sonny's mood shifts and the narrator doesn't understand why. When Sonny says he needs to get out of Harlem, the narrator dismisses him without understanding the root of his concern. The significance of the passage is alluded to—Sonny has a worry that the narrator cannot share, and he rubs the muscle of one arm. This is a reference to his heroin addiction, which is starting to worry Sonny, and he touches his arm muscle because it's sore from his intravenous drug use. Later in the story, Sonny admits to the narrator that addiction was on his mind during the conversation—he wanted to leave Harlem to save himself from drugs—but the narrator, typically un-empathetic and un-curious about Sonny's inner life, never inquires enough to understand the danger Sonny is in. This is an example of the narrator failing Sonny by telling him what's best rather than actually listening to him.

> I didn't like the way he carried himself, loose and dreamlike all the time, and I didn't like his friends, and his music seemed to be merely an excuse for the life he led. It sounded just that weird and disordered.

Related Characters: Sonny, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes when the narrator visits Sonny in New York after they've both returned from the war, and he finds Sonny living a bohemian life surrounded by musicians and drug addicts. The quote shows how little the narrator has changed since their conversation about Sonny's future as a musician; the narrator still projects his own fear and disapproval onto Sonny's lifestyle without bothering to understand why music is so important to Sonny. That the narrator says he believes music is just an excuse for Sonny's disordered lifestyle also shows that the narrator still thinks of music as a way for Sonny to shirk responsibility, rather than as a way to confront and assuage suffering, or as a sincere passion that gives Sonny a sense of meaning and fulfillment in life. In addition, this insensitive observation shows that the narrator has little understanding of the nature of addiction—he has no appreciation for the difficulty of the trap that Sonny is in. The narrator's attitude is rigid and dismissive, and he lacks compassion for and curiosity about his brother. While he thinks that he is doing what's best for Sonny, this is an example of the kind of mistreatment of Sonny that the narrator's mother warned about.

I think I may have written Sonny the very day that little Grace was buried. I was sitting in the living-room in the dark, by myself, and I suddenly thought of Sonny. My trouble made his real.

Related Characters: Sonny, Grace, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

After having a fight in New York, the narrator and Sonny don't speak for a long time. This quote explains what made the narrator finally break his silence with his brother; once his own daughter died, his grief allowed him to finally feel compassion for Sonny's suffering. This is a transformative moment in the story, because it's the first time the narrator is able to begin to see the world through Sonny's eyes, and this empathy is the foundation of a family bond built on compassion rather than obligation. It's important that this suffering is what allows the narrator to find a connection to his brother. Like Sonny's music, which turns suffering into beauty and community, this moment is an instance in which Baldwin suggests that suffering sometimes brings about something good.

In addition, this is an instance of Baldwin's use of darkness as a symbol of suffering. Throughout the story, it is when characters recognize the darkness around them (like the narrator's father did when his brother died) that they are suffering most profoundly. The narrator, sitting in the dark on the day of Grace's burial, is clearly at a low point in his life.

Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for the first time, not one of them had been rescued. Nor had they seen much in the way of rescue work being done around them....As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during an afternoon when the narrator is home alone and looking out the window at the religious revival meeting across the street. His attitude shifts over the course of the quote. At first, he is dismissive of the value of such a gathering, which seems related to his belief that music is simply a distraction from responsibility. However, as he watches the faces of the crowd, the narrator notices that as people listen to the music their faces change and they seem soothed. This is the first stirring of the narrator's ability to understand the power and importance of music, and it foreshadows his transformative experience at the jazz club. The narrator—who recognizes that everyone gathered around the revival was suffering and could use something to rescue them—seems to grapple with the possibility that music could be a way of making suffering more bearable, though he doesn't seem to make the connection yet that music might help his own suffering. It's also important to note here that the context of the revival meeting, a religious gathering, evokes a parallel between music and religion. Neither God nor music necessarily offer something "new," but they can both soothe suffering and create community.

"When she was singing before," said Sonny, abruptly, "her voice reminded me for a minute of what heroin feels like sometimes—when it's in your veins. It makes you feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And—and sure....It makes you feel—in control. Sometimes you've got to have that feeling."

Related Characters: Sonny (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs just after the narrator has watched the revival meeting from his window and Sonny has come home after having watched the same meeting from the street. Just as the narrator saw the music soothing the crowd, Sonny draws an explicit parallel between the music and the soothing aspects of his drug use. Significantly, Sonny cites the feeling of being in control that heroin gave him as a primary reason for his drug use. Throughout the story, much of the characters' suffering has been fueled by a sense of not having control over the hardship around them: the

racism, violence, addiction, and tragedy that seem to permeate Harlem. For the narrator, control came in the form of rigid adherence to responsibility and shutting out difficult emotions, and for Sonny it came in the form of heroin. While the troubles caused by Sonny's heroin use are clear, the parallel raises questions about the toll that the narrator's own coping strategy has taken on his life and emotional health; indeed, the narrator's bitterness shows that he has paid a price for his refusal to confront his own suffering.

> All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47-48

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator provides this meditation on music while he is listening to Sonny's band at the jazz club. It's a complex and ambiguous quote, but, at the very least, it signifies a turning point for the narrator in that it shows his new willingness to take Sonny's passion seriously. It's interesting that the narrator suggests that listening to music only corroborates what a person has already experienced—it's almost as though the narrator sees listening to music as being parallel to the way he himself interacts with the world. The narrator is rarely willing to take in a new perspective or experience—he only accepts ideas that support what he already thinks, which was made clear in his prior conversations with Sonny, in which he refused to listen to Sonny's point of view and dispensed advice that didn't fit with Sonny's life. The narrator then grants that creating music (which is analogous to Sonny's way of interacting with the world) is greater and more challenging, because it requires creating something new and being in touch with the self enough to channel and control the expression of powerful emotions and experiences. This passage is, in a sense, the narrator's concession that Sonny has achieved something braver and more difficult than the narrator. This is a realization that the closed-off and bitter narrator of the beginning of the story could never have had.

> They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were 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.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Creole, Sonny

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

By this point, the narrator has listened to Sonny's band for some time, and Sonny is beginning to hit his stride. Up until now, the narrator has tended to see music as a distraction from responsibility, and this is the moment in which he realizes that music actually grapples with suffering in a more honest way than the narrator ever has. The blues and jazz, the narrator realizes, are always the same story, and it's the story of his whole community. Music doesn't contradict the reality of suffering that the narrator sees all around him, but by making people hear that story, it gives people a way to confront their problems and sorrows, and it adds meaning to that suffering by making it beautiful. The narrator ends this passage by reflecting that amid all the darkness—symbolically, the suffering of everyone's lives—music is the only light there is. This compares music to salvation. It's a source of relief and comfort that isn't frivolous, escapist, or destructive, as the narrator once believed.

> I saw my 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. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Isabel, Grace, The Narrator's Father's Brother, The Narrator's Mother

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

As the story nears its end, the narrator continues to explain the thoughts and feelings that Sonny's music evokes in him. After his abstract meditations on the nature of music and its relationship to suffering, here the narrator begins to turn inward and confront his personal memories and sorrows. Significantly, these memories are deeply empathetic—he feels the stones bruising his mother's feet, and he sees the road from the saddest night of his father's life—which shows that the music is actually growing his compassion for others, and connecting him to the past suffering of his family. The narrator also begins to confront his own memories of his daughter, which seems here to be a healthy catharsis for a person reluctant to grapple with his emotions. Baldwin does not allow for a glib ending in which music erases suffering—the narrator knows that outside of the club trouble still awaits the people of Harlem ("as hungry as a tiger"). However, this passage suggests that Sonny's music has made the narrator more able to cope with the suffering he will inevitably experience, and the narrator's reflections show the extent to which his character has evolved from rigid and un-empathetic to self-reflective and compassionate.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SONNY'S BLUES

The story opens on the narrator (unnamed) who has read in the newspaper that his brother Sonny was picked up by the police the previous night for using and selling heroin. The narrator describes spending the rest of his day reeling from the news, feeling like he has ice water in his veins.

The opening of the story is disorienting and full of menace. Before the reader fully understands what has happened, Baldwin's use of frightening, visceral imagery, like the ice water in the narrator's veins, suggests that something terrible has happened. The fact that the narrator suffers so acutely from simply hearing bad news suggests that suffering is contagious.

The narrator confesses that this news isn't entirely a surprise to him. He'd had suspicions about Sonny but hadn't wanted to believe them—he hadn't ever wanted to see his brother meet the same fate as so many other men in Harlem. In the narrative present, the narrator is teaching a high school algebra class, and he reflects that many of the young men in the classroom are likely using drugs, too, because drugs bring relief from the rage they feel at knowing how few possibilities they have in their lives.

Here, the magnitude of suffering in the narrator's community becomes apparent; not only are the narrator and Sonny suffering, but they suffer in a way that mirrors the despair all around them. This passage begins to illuminate the major themes of the story: the narrator's confession that he isn't surprised by Sonny's fate will later deepen into an admission of his guilt that he didn't work to prevent it, and the narrator's seeming separation from the suffering caused by drugs will become blurred as he realizes that his respectable life and job haven't brought him relief from the suffering around him. This passage also makes a strong sociological comment on the limitations that racism places on young black men.

After the last bell of the school day, the narrator heads home to tell Isabel, his wife, the news. In the courtyard of the school, he sees someone he mistakes for Sonny—but it's actually a childhood friend of Sonny's that the narrator dislikes because he's always high and asking for money, although the narrator says that he always gives the man money when asked. Seeing him that day, the narrator realizes that he suddenly despises this man.

This introduces the story's complex ideas about family. As the narrator rushes home to his wife, he's confronted by someone who seems to be Sonny himself. Though the man isn't Sonny, the mistake evokes the blurred distinction between blood relatives and community members, who can be as important as family. This man isn't related to the narrator, but he is, nonetheless, tied to the narrator through a series of mutual favors: the narrator gives the man money, and the man seeks out the narrator to make sure he knows what happened to Sonny. Underscoring the narrator's guilt and uncertainty about family bonds, he feels no warmth towards Sonny's friend.

The narrator and Sonny's childhood friend walk together to the subway. They talk about what happened to Sonny, and the narrator reveals that he's not planning to do anything to help him because he doesn't see any way that he could be helpful. The man admits that he wonders if he might be partially responsible for Sonny's downfall, since he once told Sonny how good heroin felt. As the narrator is hearing this, he looks around the street and is filled with dread and hopelessness, seeing menace in "the people, the houses, the music" and everything else around him. He asks what will happen to Sonny, and the man says that he'll go to jail, they'll let him out, and then "it'll all just start all over again," since Sonny is an addict.

This is the moment in which the narrator's passivity becomes clear; though Sonny is his brother, the narrator has no plans to help him. His guilt isn't fully communicated in this scene, but it's hinted at when Sonny's friend is expressing his own guilt and the narrator can only look around in silence and despair. Baldwin leaves it open whether this is the narrator trying to absolve his guilt by blaming Sonny's troubles on the neighborhood, or whether it's the narrator feeling consumed by the hopelessness of how they grew up—it's likely a combination of both. To compound the despair of the scene, Sonny's friend is blunt about addiction; because addiction is cyclical, Sonny's troubles aren't likely to improve.

The narrator wants to ask Sonny's friend more questions, but knows he couldn't bear the answers. The man tells the narrator that this is going to be hard on Sonny, but the narrator doesn't react. At the subway station, the man asks for a dollar and the narrator, realizing he doesn't hate the man anymore, gives him five. The man tells the narrator not to worry about Sonny, that maybe he would write to him, but the narrator makes no similar promise.

It's important that the narrator mistook the friend for Sonny at first—the narrator's growing compassion for the friend is the first stirring of the emotional growth that will finally allow the narrator to repair his relationship with his brother. Sonny's friend's honesty and kindness make the narrator consider the reality of suffering outside of his own. It's enough to make him give money, but not enough to make him promise to write to Sonny—at least not yet.

The narrative jumps ahead to a few months later, when the narrator's young daughter Grace has just died. The narrator says that it wasn't until this happened that he finally wrote to Sonny, and Sonny wrote him back a letter that "made [him] feel like a bastard." In the letter, Sonny admits how much he needed to hear from the narrator, but says that he didn't write first because he knew he had caused so much pain. Sonny is ashamed of himself—he says he's glad their parents (implying that Sonny and the narrator are brothers) aren't alive to see him like this—and he's scared about his future, worried that he will relapse once he's out of jail. Sonny is clearly suffering tremendously, and he takes pains to tell the narrator that he shouldn't think that the trouble Sonny is in has anything to do with being a musician, though he can't say exactly what the source of his trouble is.

Once the narrator has suffered tremendously himself, he begins to understand that Sonny needs his help and decides to write him a letter. Sonny's reply compounds the narrator's guilt at not having reached out sooner, because he realizes that his silence only added to Sonny's suffering. This scene begins to sketch out Baldwin's ideas about family bonds. The narrator and Sonny had been suffering privately, and the act of simply writing a letter was able to bring some relief to both of them. This hints at the power of compassion to heal despair. The passage also makes clear the difficulties that the two brothers face; Sonny's comment about his drug use being unrelated to music hints at the narrator's disapproval, and it's clear that Sonny's addiction is a problem that still looms on the horizon.

The brothers continue to write during Sonny's time in jail, and the narrator picks Sonny up once he's released. The narrator describes that, on seeing Sonny for the first time, long-forgotten memories return to him because "I had begun, finally, to wonder about Sonny, about the life that Sonny lived inside." Sonny looks haggard, but the narrator sees traces of his baby brother in Sonny's face.

This passage makes clear that one of the narrator's moral failings is his inability to empathize with the suffering of others. His growth throughout the story mirrors a kind of growth of this moment, in which the narrator first begins to wonder about Sonny's inner life. For Baldwin, it is genuine curiosity and compassion that leads to impactful and lasting family bonds—it's significant that it's only in this state of empathy that the narrator can see Sonny as his baby brother.

Sonny and the narrator take a taxi to the narrator's house, driving through wealthier Manhattan neighborhoods and then into the "killing streets" of Harlem, where they both grew up and where the narrator now lives. The narrator observes the newly-built housing projects jutting up out of the streets "like rocks in the middle of a boiling sea," and he describes young boys, exactly like they had been, growing up feeling smothered in their houses, then coming "into the streets for light and air and [finding] themselves encircled by disaster." He notes that while he and Sonny can both be said to have escaped Harlem (the narrator by becoming a schoolteacher, and Sonny by not having lived in Harlem for years), a part of each of them is still on those cruel streets.

Seeing Harlem through Sonny's eyes leads the narrator to reflect on the conditions in which they grew up. Baldwin uses frightening language and imagery to explain the forces that drive young black men to drugs and crime, suggesting the inevitability of such lives because of the lack of other possibilities. The narrator and Sonny are both separate from that world in Harlem, but the distinction between them and the way they grew up is blurred—Sonny's passion for music got him out of the neighborhood but not away from drugs, and the narrator's devotion to order and respectability got him a good job, albeit one that's still in Harlem. This passage implies that Harlem still has a hold on both of them, and it contributes to their suffering.

The narrator then reveals that he lives in one of the menacing housing projects he described. He notes that his sons, growing up there, will face the same danger and suffering that he and Sonny faced as children, and he says that bringing Sonny to his home feels like putting him back in the situation that he'd "almost died trying to escape."

In the context of the narrator's description of the horrors awaiting children in Harlem, it's devastating to learn that his own children are growing up in a rundown housing project. The narrator feels like a failure for allowing them to grow up that way, and also for not having a safer place to bring Sonny to recover from his addiction. The subtext here is that, despite the narrator's best efforts, he has no way to protect his family from the suffering that surrounds them.

Despite this, Sonny's first night living with the narrator's family is successful—the narrator's two sons like him, and Isabel seems glad to have him there. The narrator, though, seems on edge, looking for clues that Sonny might be using heroin again and hoping he isn't.

This scene shows the possibilities of family life—despite the brothers' long estrangement, Sonny seems comfortable in the narrator's home. All isn't well yet, though. The narrator cannot stop wondering if and when Sonny's addiction will return.

The narrator begins to remember his father, whom he describes as "always on the lookout for 'something a little better.'" The narrator says this was even true on the weekends when his father got drunk, but that his father died on one of those drunken weekends before he could find the better life he was looking for. The narrator explains that Sonny and his father never got along because they were too much alike.

The midsection of the story, a digression about childhood and family life, shows the importance of family and the past in shaping the characters' present lives. The narrator's father is a microcosm of the suffering in Harlem; while he strove for a better life, his drinking got the better of him. This isn't a good sign for Sonny, who is like his father.

The narrator digresses to recall the experience of children in Harlem listening to their parents speak about "the **darkness** outside," which refers to all that they've had to endure. He speaks of the comfort and terror that this brings children—the comfort of knowing that the adults stand between them and the darkness outside, and the terror of knowing that the adults won't always protect them, so the children will one day have these same adult experiences of suffering.

This passage again illustrates the hardships of growing up black in America by showing the pervasive fear of the future and the sense of antagonism lurking outside the safety of the home. Baldwin is interweaving comfort and fear to show that those concepts are, in a way, interdependent—it's fear that makes the children seek and appreciate comfort. This echoes the scene in the jazz club (and the two are also connected by the image of darkness), which suggests that suffering and relief are intertwined, as relief is made meaningful through suffering.

The time period of the story then jumps backward, with the narrator recalling the last time he saw his mother alive. This was when he came home from the army for his father's funeral, and his mother made him promise he would look after Sonny if anything happened to her. The narrator doesn't understand her worry, so she explains that her husband, the narrator's father, once had a brother who died. The narrator has never heard of this brother before.

This passage finally illuminates the depth of the narrator's guilt over his relationship to Sonny. Not only did his silence contribute to his brother's suffering, but their estrangement violated an explicit promise the narrator had made to his mother. This passage also reveals another significant silence between family members: nobody had ever talked about the narrator's uncle.

The narrator's mother recalls that the brother used to play guitar and sing at different places. One Saturday night he and the narrator's father were drunk and walking home when a group of drunk white men aimed their car at the brother and ran him over in the street. The narrator's mother explains that this changed her husband irrevocably—that it made him crazy, bitter, and suspicious of whites. She tells the narrator that she's telling him this story now because he's got a brother, too, and "the world ain't changed." The narrator promises not to let anything happen to Sonny, and his mother adds that even though he might not be able to stop something from happening to Sonny, he must always let Sonny know he's there for him.

Baldwin's description of the brother as a musician suggests that readers should associate him with Sonny, and his violent death underscores the danger that Sonny is facing. This passage also makes clear the danger that the narrator himself is facing: after his brother died, the narrator's father was consumed by a guilt and despair that led him to drink himself to an early death. The narrator's own guilt and suffering, then, are similar to his father's, and could become devastating if Sonny were to experience a similar fate to his uncle. The generational parallels show the ways in which suffering replicates itself. This repetition of familial patterns is inauspicious for the brothers, but the mother's promise, if it is kept, seems to offer both of them a way out.

Then, after his mother dies, the narrator gets a furlough from the army to attend her funeral. Remembering his promise, he talks with teenaged Sonny about his future, and Sonny says he wants to be a jazz pianist. Horrified that this isn't a respectable or financially secure occupation, the narrator argues with Sonny, and Sonny insists that he doesn't care what his brother thinks. The narrator tells him that people shouldn't always do exactly what they want to do, and Sonny responds that, "I think people ought to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for?"

Though the narrator is attempting to make good on his promise to his mother, this is another example of his difficulty with empathy. Sonny wants to live a life of passion, and the narrator is sternly disapproving because he cannot relate. This is a failure of compassion and, in a sense, a betrayal of the familial bond, which Baldwin insists must be based on empathy and kindness. Family can bring relief from suffering, but not if it's approached as a rote fulfillment of obligation. In order to help Sonny, the narrator needs to try to understand him, but he fails to do that here.

Since the narrator must return to his army service, he tells Sonny that he has arranged for his wife's family to take Sonny in. This isn't ideal, as Isabel's parents are touchy and hadn't approved of her marriage to the narrator. Seeming to understand the awkwardness of the situation, Sonny tells the narrator that he wants to leave Harlem (where Isabel's family lives as well) instead. The narrator notices a worry in Sonny's eyes that he doesn't understand, and sees him touching his arm muscle. The narrator insists that Sonny stay in school in Harlem, and reminds him that Isabel's family has a piano he can use, but the worry remains in Sonny's face.

In the moment, the narrator does not understand the troubles that Sonny is experiencing. Sonny wants to leave Harlem, and as he says this he's worried and touching his arm. This is a subtle evocation of Sonny's increasing intravenous drug use (which would make his arm sore) and his concern that his addiction will snowball if he doesn't leave Harlem. The narrator's failure of empathy and curiosity, however, keeps him on the outside of these troubles, and leads him to put Sonny in a situation that makes his problems worse. This is a failure of his familial obligation.

Isabel's letters describe to the narrator how serious Sonny is about his music—she's worried, even, about the extent of his dedication to it. Finally, Isabel's family realizes that Sonny hasn't been going to school and they scold him, which makes Sonny realize that they've endured his presence and constant practicing entirely for the sake of the narrator. Sonny can't bear this knowledge, so he joins the navy and leaves without saying goodbye.

Sonny's relationship to Isabel's family is another instance of the harm that a family bond not based on compassion can do. Isabel's family takes Sonny in, but they do it out of obligation rather than kindness—Sonny picks up on this, and it makes his problems worse instead of better. This passage also shows the complexity of Sonny's passion for music. While it's clearly the only thing that brings him joy, it's also making him drop out of school.

The next time the narrator sees Sonny they are both back in New York after the war, and he feels that Sonny's life is "weird and disordered," a problem that the narrator believes is fueled by music. After a terrible fight, the narrator comes to Sonny's apartment to make up, but Sonny won't speak to him. He's surrounded by people whom the narrator notices he treats like family, and Sonny tells the narrator that they're dead to one another. The narrator recalls that they didn't speak again until after his daughter died and he sent Sonny the letter in jail.

Though Sonny's passion for music brings him joy and community, the narrator can only see the negative effects of music on Sonny's life. This leads to a split between the two of them that explicitly defies the narrator's promise to his mother. This is an acute instance of the consequences of the narrator's lack of empathy. By trying to understand who Sonny is and what he cares about, the narrator could have intervened in his life before his problems got out of control. Instead, the narrator belittles Sonny's passion and forces Sonny to turn to his community for family—but unfortunately, this community has the same addiction problems as Sonny.

The narrator quickly describes his daughter Grace's agonizing death from polio. Isabel saw Grace die, and her nightmares about it still wake her up at night. The narrator doesn't describe his own grief, but says that the day Grace was buried he wrote to Sonny because "My trouble made his real."

For Christians, "grace" refers to God's ability and desire to save sinners without a particular reason, and it's significant that the narrator's daughter's name is Grace; her death, in a way, saves the narrator from himself by allowing him, for the first time, to empathize with Sonny.

The story then returns to the present. The narrator is home alone and considering searching Sonny's room, presumably for drugs. Out his living room window, he sees a revival meeting across the street. The narrator first remarks that these revivals are common but they aren't saving anyone, but then he notices that the people watching the revival seem changed by the music–they are mesmerized and peaceful. He sees Sonny at the edge of the crowd, and Sonny gives the singers some change.

One of the narrator's most prominent traits is his negative outlook—he's obsessed with suffering, and, as his regimented life shows, he prefers to focus on keeping suffering at bay than actively seeking joy. His first reaction to the revival (that it isn't helpful) is predictable, but his reconsideration also hints at his growth. He is beginning to see what Sonny already knows: that people can always seek out ways to be happy, even if their circumstances are dire.

Sonny comes home and invites the narrator to see him play in the Village that night. The narrator agrees, sensing that he can't possibly say no. Sonny tells him that hearing the woman across the street sing reminded him of how heroin feels: he says, "It makes you feel—in control. Sometimes you've got to have that feeling." The narrator asks him if he needs heroin to play music, and Sonny explains that it's not to play music, but in order to stand the world, "in order to keep from shaking to pieces."

This scene shows the changing relationship between the brothers. Though the narrator hates that Sonny plays music, he finally agrees to see him play, which allows them to have an honest conversation about addiction. Sonny draws the parallel between the sense of control that music and drugs give him, which evokes the control that the narrator desperately seeks through creating order with his job and family.

The narrator makes a disparaging comment that all of Sonny's friends have shaken to pieces, and in response Sonny explains that many of them actually haven't, at least not yet. Sonny remarks that this is "all any of us can say." He then comments that the singing woman at the revival must have suffered so much to be able to sing like that, and the narrator says that there's no way not to suffer. Sonny agrees, but says it's never stopped anyone from trying.

This conversation, more clearly than any other, shows the narrator's and Sonny's differing worldviews. While Sonny would seem to be the brother more consumed by suffering, the narrator is actually the one more convinced that suffering is the dominant force in the world. The narrator suggests that suffering is unavoidable, and Sonny doesn't disagree, but he at least understands that there are ways to mitigate it and find joy.

In this moment, the narrator realizes the harm that his silence while Sonny was in jail has done to their relationship. Sonny continues talking about suffering, saying that while people suffer for no reason, sometimes it's easier to accept if a person does something to make themselves feel that they're suffering for something instead of nothing. The narrator argues that it's better to just accept it outright, and Sonny erupts, telling him that everyone tries not to suffer, and that the narrator is only upset about people who try in ways that aren't his own.

The narrator is finally listening to Sonny and allowing himself to understand the harm he has done with his silence—this is tremendous growth from the un-empathetic man he once was. Still, the narrator resists being honest with himself about the fact that his own life of responsibility and order isn't markedly different from Sonny's life of passion, since both are just trying to find a way not to suffer. This is the last hurdle to the narrator being able to empathize with and understand Sonny's life.

The narrator tries to frame his statement as a concern that Sonny will die using drugs to try not to suffer, but it falls flat. He yearns to tell Sonny that he will never fail him again, but knows that it would sound like an empty promise after what they've been through, so the narrator makes the promise silently to himself. Sonny explains that there's a storm inside himself and he can't get rid of it. "When you finally try to get with it and play it," he says, "you realize nobody's listening. So you've got to listen. You got to find a way to listen."

Here, the narrator seems to be awakening to his job as a brother. While before he had promised his mother he would look after Sonny, now he is promising himself, which suggests that he finally understands the gravity of his role. Sonny's explanation of his need to play music foreshadows the narrator's own experience in the jazz club, in which he finds himself finally really listening to music and finding within the music a relief from his own internal storm.

Sonny begins to tell the narrator about what the worst of his addiction was like. He talks about doing terrible things to himself and others, and wanting to escape while knowing that his actions were just digging him farther in. He confesses that when their mother died he wanted to leave Harlem to get away from the drugs, but once he ran away and came back everything was still the same. "It can come again," he warns the narrator.

With the narrator finally able to empathize and listen, Sonny can confess his worst memories and fears. Of course, these revolve around the self-perpetuating nature of suffering: addiction begets more addiction, meanness begets more meanness, and, no matter how long Sonny stays away, everything is always the same when he returns. This shows the seriousness of the narrator's promise: it's going to be difficult to really be there for Sonny.

Sonny and the narrator go to a nightclub downtown (where Sonny is to play that night), and the narrator meets some of Sonny's musician friends, including a man named Creole. The narrator realizes how beloved and admired Sonny is in this circle of musicians, and he is a little surprised.

The narrator had always looked down on Sonny's musician friends for living disordered and bohemian lives, but going to the jazz club makes the narrator realize that in his absence, Sonny created his own family who love him.

Sonny, Creole, and another man begin to play onstage while the narrator watches from a table in the corner. The narrator reflects that it's very rare for a person to really hear and be moved by music, and when you do, it's a different experience from playing it. To hear music is a private evocation of personal experience, he believes, but to play it is to bring something new into the world—it's "more terrible because it has no words, and more triumphant, too, for that same reason."

The narrator draws an insightful distinction between listening to music, which can only evoke what you've already experienced, and playing music, which must create something that hasn't existed before. He's finally understanding the value that Sonny brings to the world with his music.

The narrator realizes that Sonny is struggling—he's not fully throwing himself into his music—and the narrator thinks how hard it must be to have to make an instrument come alive. As the band begins the second set, Creole leads them into a different mood and something changes in Sonny's playing. The narrator realizes that the band is telling the same tale of suffering that everyone has always told, but they're using their art to keep it new in order to make people listen. The price of searching for a musical language that will communicate suffering is steep—madness, ruin, death—but when a band succeeds, the narrator calls it "the only light we've got in all this **darkness**."

As Sonny begins to play well, the narrator finds in the music an entry point into confronting his own suffering. He simultaneously understands the difficulty of Sonny's craft and the consequences of overcoming such difficulty to bring beauty into the world; these musicians often pay with their sanity and health. Significantly, the narrator is no longer judging them for this, but rather admiring their generosity in sacrificing parts of themselves in order to guide others through the darkness of their lives and bring whatever relief they can. This appreciation for Sonny shows the magnitude of the narrator's empathetic growth.

Hearing Sonny play reminds the narrator viscerally of his own suffering, Sonny's suffering, and the suffering of generations back—he says he can feel how the stones on the road bruised his mother's feet, and he can see the moonlit night when his father's brother died. He begins to cry, and remembers that outside the club the world is still waiting for them with all of its trouble.

Throughout the story, Baldwin emphasizes the consequences of silence. The father suffered because he wouldn't talk about his brother's death, and Sonny and the narrator suffered because of their estrangement. Sonny's music is shown as an antidote to this silence—an acknowledgement of suffering that doesn't take pain away, but at least makes its burdens easier to carry. Baldwin also lyrically connects the narrator's and Sonny's suffering to the suffering of their parents, suggesting an endless cycle of suffering and oppression within the black community.

When the band pauses, the narrator asks a bartender to take drinks up to the bandstand. The narrator watches her place a glass of scotch and milk on top of Sonny's piano. Just before they start to play again, Sonny sips from it and meets eyes with the narrator. He puts the glass on top of his piano and begins to play, and the narrator watches the cup shake above Sonny's head "like the very **cup of trembling**."

Baldwin ends the story with an optimistic symbol, a reference to a moment in the Book of Isaiah when God takes suffering from mankind. The narrator, who has finally learned to empathize with and care for his brother, has found relief from his own suffering through Sonny's music. Baldwin doesn't imply that their lives will cease to be hard, but he at least suggests that their mutual love can spare them the worst of their sufferings.

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