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## Robertson: Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

### BALDWIN'S "SONNY'S BLUES": THE SCAPEGOAT METAPHOR

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In James Baldwin's only book of short stories, *Going to Meet the Man*, "Sonny's Blues" stands out as the best, most memorable. This story is both realistic and symbolic, part autobiography and part fiction. So memorable is "Sonny's Blues" that a student once put it at the top of a list of thirty stories read for a course in fiction. She commented, "The story haunts you; its beauty continues in your mind long after the original reading and discussion." The story's haunting beauty comes from our participation in the scapegoat metaphor that creates the intricate tracery which holds the story together, forming a graceful spiral, a pattern of correspondences which informs and entices as it helps us to be free.<sup>1</sup>

The scapegoat metaphor is developed through several images, the most important of which is music,<sup>2</sup> with its links to suffering and brotherhood. But we are only dimly aware of this scapegoat pattern until we see the final, startling biblical image of the scotch and milk drink, "the very cup of trembling,"<sup>3</sup> which follows Sonny's playing of the blues and which clarifies the story's meaning. This "cup of trembling", then, is at once the Old Testament cup of justice and the New Testament cup of Gethsemane, or mercy.<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament allusion to the "cup of trembling" leads directly to the scapegoat metaphor and the idea of pain and suffering of a people.<sup>5</sup> The New Testament story of hope is carried in Sonny's name which suggests Christ symbolism and leads to the New Testament message of the 'cup of trembling' as the cup of Gethsemane which Christ drank, symbolizing the removal of sins for all who believe and hope for eternal life through belief in him.<sup>6</sup> Sonny's name echoes this special relationship. Sonny, the scapegoat, is the hope of his particular world.

The power of guilt and suffering is revealed in Sonny's tenuous relationship with his own brother and in his immediate empathy with the revivalists; it has been foreshadowed in the anguish of the young friend who still feels a connection with Sonny. Through these people's responses we come to understand that brothers—literal or metaphorical—rescue, redeem, bring righteous anger, and act as scapegoats to open up the world of suffering; the friend begins this for Sonny's brother, the revivalists for Sonny, and Sonny for his brother and for us.

Further, the scapegoat metaphor is strengthened and enriched by the metaphor of shared suffering carried through music—either by a young boy's whistle, by the revivalist's hymns, or finally and most significantly by Sonny's hot piano on which he plays the blues. The blues metaphor also involves suffering and the sharing of suffering that supercedes race and time and cements us all together within our shared humanity. Sonny's music—the blues—has power to transform both his and our pain; through his sharing, Sonny becomes the ultimate scapegoat.

The term 'scapegoat' means 'sharing of pain'; it implies a true understanding of another's suffering. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, the scapegoat, the *capere emissarius*, or azazel, was originally "a goat over the heads of which the high priest of the ancient Jews confessed the sins of the people on the Day of Atonement, after which it was allowed to escape." More secularly and popularly, the scapegoat is "a person, group, or thing upon whom the blame for the mistakes or crimes of others is thrust."

Baldwin, himself, defines for us the scapegoat metaphor when he asserts "That all mankind is united by virtue of their humanity."<sup>7</sup> He writes elsewhere, "It is a terrible, an inexorable, law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own: in the face of one's victim, one sees oneself."<sup>8</sup> In another context, Jack Matthews, in *Archetypal Themes in the Modern Story*, asks "When is a person not himself?" He answers, "When he reminds you of someone else and you can't see the living presence because of the remembered image. Or when, through accident or muddled design, he begins to embody our own secret fears. In psychology, this is termed projection; in a story or folktale, it is a celebration of the Scapegoat theme."<sup>9</sup> Thus the literary scapegoat, through his own personal suffering or by his metaphorical sharing of his own sorrow, may allow us to see into life and into ourselves and thus vicariously transfer our guilt and pain through him and his suffering.

In this story music is the thread that accompanies and develops the brotherhood/scapegoat metaphor. For in his music Sonny reveals both his suffering and his understanding of others' pain. His music becomes a mystical, spiritual medium, an open-ended metaphor simultaneously comforting the player and the listener and releasing their guilt and pain. No words *could* have expressed so well what Sonny's music conveyed effortlessly. For, according to Cirlot, "Music represents an intermediate zone between the differentiated or material world and the undifferentiated realm of the 'pure will' of Schopenhauer."<sup>10</sup> The power of this

emotional transfer is seen in the brother's response. For through Sonny's music his brother comes to understand his own life, his parents' experience, his daughter's death, and his wife's grief. The brother recapitulates his own, Sonny's, and the family's suffering here at the end of the story. But as Kirkegaard says, in *Repetition*, "repetition" replaces "the more traditional Platonic term anamnesis or recollection." This is "not the simple repeating of an experience, but the recreating of it which redeems or awakens it to life, the end of the process...being the apocalyptic promise: 'Behold, I make all things new.'"<sup>11</sup> Sonny's awakening is done through his blues, and its effect is revealed through the brother's sudden understanding, conveyed in the final image of the Scotch and milk drink, "the very cup of trembling" ("SB," 141). This central biblical image reverberates with life and reinforces the scapegoat metaphor. This recreation of life is also what the blues are all about. We come full circle.

The scapegoat metaphor is first presented very quietly when Sonny's childhood friend offers to become a scapegoat, insisting upon his symbolic action when he tells Sonny's brother, "Funny thing...when I saw the papers this morning, the first thing I asked myself was if I had anything to do with [Sonny's arrest for using and selling heroin]. I felt sort of responsible" ("SB," 106-7). The young man offers to take the blame for Sonny's fall, but his hesitant plea is offensive to the brother who, like us, does not understand the symbolic significance of the act. For, instead of accepting and sharing the man's guilt, the brother becomes angry at the friend's panhandling. He feels superior to him and rejects his offer and his sympathy.

Just prior to this meeting with the old friend a boy's whistle echoes through the school yard. The whistle is "at once very complicated and very simple; it seemed to be pouring out of him as though he were a bird, and it sounded very cool and moving through all that harsh, bright air, only just holding its own through all those other sounds" ("SB," 104). But this music creates a central abstract image, a tone poem carrying the sadness and guilt of the brother, a simple yet complicated sounding of pain.

This first subtle pairing of music with guilt and pain sets the tone for the story. This young man, this emotional 'brother,' cannot comfort Sonny's brother, but paradoxically his sincere concern increases the brother's understanding of Sonny's problems. Further, this sad young man illustrates the community's desperate need for a savior as well as setting up the scapegoat metaphor. For the brother sees in the friend as in a mirror the great sadness and courage of Sonny. He says

"All at once something inside gave and threatened to come pouring out of me. I didn't hate him [the friend] any more. I felt that in another moment I'd start crying like a child" ("SB," 108). This emotional release is the first step toward understanding and the first presentation of the Old Testament scapegoat motif so delicately interwoven in this story.

The scapegoat metaphor is next presented and perfectly symbolized by the street revival. The street people are a paradigm of life, a kind of representative cross-section of humanity. All sorts of people watch and listen to the street revivalists—working people, children, older folks, street women, Sonny, and Sonny's brother who watches from above at the window. At this "old fashioned revival meeting" there are "three sisters in black, and a brother. All they [have are] their voices and their Bibles and a tambourine." These people sing "'Tis the old ship of Zion'....it has rescued many a thousand!" ("SB," 128-9).

The listeners hear nothing new, only the old pain and suffering and the offer of relief from three sisters and a brother, mortals like themselves; yet these four make suffering real. Their music acts as a mirror for the watchers whose response illustrates the scapegoat metaphor in action: "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" ("SB," 129). These spirituals are an amalgam of joy and the blues, touching everyone who listens and helping them share the guilt and pain of the human condition.

The revival, central to the brother's awareness since it incorporates music, religion, and suffering, helps Sonny to articulate the relationship between suffering and human understanding. Also, for Sonny, the woman revivalist serves as a scapegoat; she helps him to understand his own suffering just as she had helped those who listened and contributed to her cause. For Sonny, this insight into the woman's suffering makes his own pain bearable, makes it possible to reach out to his brother. For Sonny understands this scene. Touched by their pain, he alone articulates its universal meaning—suffering. New Testament echoes of brother and savior are palpable in his response: "It's *repulsive* to think you have to suffer that much" ("SB," 132). But ironically, the biblical scapegoat metaphor suggests group suffering as well as individual suffering.

Sonny's own pain has been personal and private. He had tried to tell his brother about his suffering in the letter from prison, but he was almost inarticulate. His suffering went beyond words. Now, after the brothers have experienced the revival, Sonny tries again to communicate with his brother by explaining his relationship with music: "you finally try to get with it and play it, [and] you realize *nobody's* listening. So *you've* got to listen. You got to find a way to listen," ("SB," 133) to distance the pain, to look at despair and deal with guilt in order to live. To play this way requires brutal honesty and empathy with the suffering of others. Sonny says, I "can't forget—where I've been. I don't mean just the physical place I've been, I mean where I've *been*. And *what* I've been....I've been something I didn't recognize, didn't know I could be. Didn't know anybody could be" ("SB," 133-34). But the painful rendition of the revivalists shows him musically that others have been there too.

Significantly, Sonny invites his brother to hear him play right after the street revival when they talk for almost the first time. Sonny understands his own need and his brother's suffering because someone else's suffering mirrors his own, effectively causing his confession and his sharing of his own pain through his music, mirror of man's soul. Music is able to heal wounds, for when Sonny is in perfect harmony with himself and with his environment, when he understands, he plays the piano effortlessly. Now Sonny's confession of failure also prepares for the final scene where Sonny plays the blues, an appropriate musical form based on folk music and characterized by minor harmonies, slow tempo, and melancholy words. The blues, like the tuneless whistle and the melancholy spirituals sung by the revivalists, reinforce the idea of human suffering carried by the scapegoat metaphor. For the blues, sad and melancholy jazz, are a mood, a feeling, a means of escape and entertainment; the blues, especially, are a way of sharing suffering, a way of strengthening the idea of community. The blues, the tune without the words in this instance, help the inarticulate young pianist to communicate with his brother and with the world. Thus he enriches the central metaphor for the story. For according to C. W. Sylvander, "Art can be a means for release from the 'previous condition' when it is heard, listened to, understood."<sup>12</sup>

The linkage between the scapegoat motif and the music is clearly revealed when Creole has the group play the blues and signifies that this particular rendition is 'Sonny's blues.' L. H. Pratt notes that "Once the narrator draws near to listen, the blues becomes the means by which Sonny is able to lead his brother, through a confrontation with

the meaning of life, into a discovery of self."<sup>13</sup> Through the blues the brothers can communicate. The blues become the last and greatest reinforcer of the scapegoat metaphor. For through the music something magical happens.

The narrator comes to understand that "not many people ever hear [music]. [But]...When something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations" (SB," 137). The same thing is true of our suffering and our alienation from others. Until we understand another's pain, we cannot understand our own. We must be transformed as the musician is. The musician, a kind of scapegoat, removes the pain of existence and helps us understand our suffering.

Sonny—the name echoes his strong New Testament scapegoat position—takes the pain away for all those who listen when he plays the blues. But as Baldwin says, Sonny cannot be free unless we listen and we will not be free either until he removes our pain—or until we believe on his ability to remove that suffering; Sonny thus serves to free those who listen as the cup of Gethsemane serves to free those who believe. Sonny's name echoes this special relationship and speaks of him as the ultimate scapegoat.

The brother, then, represents us also as he vividly illustrates our human response to the scapegoat offer. We accept, as understanding and insight come through the music; we change, for the function of the scapegoat is vicarious death. The ancient scapegoat was presented *alive* and allowed to escape; but metaphorically he represented the death of sin and pain for those covered by his action. Metaphysically what happens when we hear, as Sonny knows, is a death of our old understanding or the old ways and a recreation of a new way of being. So finally, at the end, in the image of the Scotch and milk drink, an image so unprepared for as to be startling, we see Sonny's symbolic value as the scapegoat. The transformation occurs as the music plays, because for the musician "What is evoked...is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours" ("SB," 137).

Only in music can Sonny truly tell all and fulfill his function as a scapegoat. Only in music can he reach our hearts and minds. Thus the last and clearest presentation of the scapegoat metaphor comes at the end of the story. Here "Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others....It was no longer a lament" ("SB," 140). This is a clear expression of the scapegoat metaphor. For Sonny's sharing through music transforms the pain. As the narrator

says, "Freedom lurked around us and I understood at last that he could help us be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did" ("SB," 140). This freedom is the Black's escape, the reader's escape, Sonny's escape. It is the scapegoat metaphor in action, a release for Sonny's brother and for us too. For Sonny "was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever" ("SB," 140).

The reversal of the situation at the end is important. The blues which Creole guides Sonny to play are central. For to play the blues one must first have suffered; then one creates the form to hold the pain, a fluid changing style where, according to John Reilly, "One uses the skill one has achieved by practice and experience in order to reach toward others."<sup>14</sup> The narrator expresses it best: "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" ("SB," 139).

Sonny's brother indicates that he both understands and symbolically shares Sonny's pain and guilt by sending the Scotch and milk drink. He affirms the religious connection with his comment, "For me, then, as they began to play again [the cup of Scotch and milk] glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling" ("SB," 141). The drink of Scotch and milk develops the image of Sonny as sinner and savior, the God/man, the scapegoat, the unlikely mixture which saves. This image conveys Sonny's complex purpose and suggests, on an earthly level, that Sonny's pain will continue, but his pain is shared and understood by his brother. On the second level it suggests that as God took away the pain for Israel, and as Christ takes away the pain and sin of the world for the believer, so does Sonny, the scapegoat, take away pain and guilt for his brother, for the listeners, and for us. As Keith Byerman said, "The drink itself, Scotch and milk, is an emblem of simultaneous destruction and nurture to the system; it cannot be reduced to one or the other. Sonny's acceptance of it indicates that his life will continue on the edge between the poison of his addiction and the nourishment of his music."<sup>15</sup> But Sonny *has* drunk the cup of pain before; now the brother joins in, empathizes, understands. Sonny drinks the Scotch and milk and continues to suffer, but part of his suffering is removed by his brother's understanding. For the brother, the action itself suggests increased understanding and a sharing of Sonny's pain.

The brother's final comment about the 'cup of trembling' emphasizes the narrator's understanding and reinterprets the image,



making Sonny a true scapegoat for the reader and enlarging our vision as well. Only with the last image do we reflect on the biblical imagery, seeing Sonny's linkage to Aaron and to Christ. Then we concentrate on Sonny's name; he is transformed before our very eyes and we see in his ceremonial acceptance of the drink his function as a scapegoat, a substitute for all.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This analysis intends only to peel the layers of meaning from the story and to integrate the recurrent scapegoat metaphor with the final startling, unprepared for biblical image. Thus this interpretation of Baldwin's most famous story does not compete with interpretations by others that involve social criticism, philosophical changes, prophetic voice, or Baldwin's place in Black literary history. Each of those has more than amply been done by other critics. See especially: *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Therman O'Daniel (Washington, D.C., 1977); John Reilly, "'Sonny's Blues': James Baldwin's Image of Black Community," *NALF* 4 (1970), 56-60; Elaine Ognibene, "Black Literature Revisited: 'Sonny's Blues,'" *EJ* 60 (Jan. 1971), 36-37; Donald C. Murray, "James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': Complicated and Simple," *SSF* 14 (1977), 353-357; Sigmund Ro, "The Black Musician as Literary Hero: Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues' and Kelley's 'Cry for Me,'" *ASS* 7 (1975), 17-48; Bernhard Ostendorf, "James Baldwin, 'Sonny's Blues,'" in *Die amerikanische Short Story der Gegenwart: Interpretation*, ed. Peter Freese (Berlin, 1976), pp. 194-104; M. Thomas Inge, "James Baldwin's Blues," *NCL* 2 (Sept. 1972), 8-11; and Shirley A. Williams, "The Black Musician: The Black Hero as Light Bearer," *Give Birth to Brightness* (New York, 1973), pp. 145-166. This paper draws specifically where mentioned from these critics but owes them also a debt of inspiration.

<sup>2</sup>See also Inge, "James Baldwin's Blues," who declares that the musical metaphor controls the story and Sonny's salvation, and Shirley Williams, "The Black Musician," who attests that the musician is an archetypal representative for Blacks and music is his medium of achievement.

<sup>3</sup>James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues," in *Going to Meet the Man* (New York, 1965), p. 141. All further references are given in text as "SB" and page number.

<sup>4</sup>"Cup," the rendering mostly in the Old Testament of the Heb. *kos*; in the New Testament of the Greek *proterion*...5. Figurative. 'Cup' is employed in both Testaments in some curious metaphorical phrases: ...The 'cup of trembling,' literally, 'cup of reeling, intoxication' (Isa. 51:17, 22; Zech. 12:2), 'cup of

astonishment and desolation' (Ezek. 23:33), 'cup of fury' (Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15), 'cup of indignation' (Rev. 14:10) are figures representing the effects of Jehovah's wrath upon the wicked. God is represented as the master of a banquet, dealing madness and stupor of vengeance to guilty guests. There is in the prophets no more frequent or terrific image, and it is repeated with pathetic force in the language of our Lord's agony (Matt. 26:39; 42; John 18:11). Merrill Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, 1966), p. 230. See also Psalms 75:8: "For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture; and he poureth out of the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out and drink them."

<sup>5</sup>See Leviticus 16:15-16; 20:22: "Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering, that is for the people and bring his blood within the veil, and do with that blood as he did with the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat: And he shall make an atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions in all their sins: and so shall he do for the tabernacle of the congregation, that remaineth among them in the midst of their uncleanness....And when he hath made an end of reconciling the holy place and the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar, he shall bring the live goat: And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness." See also Zechariah 12:2: "Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling (or slumber, or poison) unto all the people round about when they shall be in the siege both against Judah and against Jerusalem." And see also Isaiah 51:17; 22: "Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, which hast drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury; thou hast drunken the dregs of the cup of trembling, and wrung them out....Thus saith thy Lord the Lord, and thy God that pleadeth the cause of his people, Behold, I have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, even the dregs of the cup of my fury; thou shalt no more drink it again."

<sup>6</sup>See Matthew 27:34: "They gave him vinegar to drink mixed with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink." However, in his death he symbolically drank the cup of trembling, the cup of God's wrath. See Matthew 26:39: "And he went a little farther, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, 'O my father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.'" See also Matthew 20:22-23: "'Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the

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baptism that I am baptized with?' 'Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with.'" See also Mark 14:36: "'Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me; nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.'" Also consider Isaiah 53:6: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every man to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

<sup>7</sup>Louis H. Pratt, *James Baldwin* (Boston, 1978), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown: A Letter from Harlem," *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York, 1961), p. 71.

<sup>9</sup>Jack Matthews, ed., *Archetypal Themes in the Modern Story* (New York, 1973), p. 79.

<sup>10</sup>J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd ed., Jack Sage, tr. (London, 1962), p. 225.

<sup>11</sup>In Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, 1973), p. 345.

<sup>12</sup>Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, *James Baldwin* (New York, 1980), p. 117.

<sup>13</sup>Pratt, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup>John Reilly, "'Sonny's Blues': James Baldwin's Image of Black Community," *BALF*, 4 (1970), 169.

<sup>15</sup>Keith E. Byerman, "Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity in 'Sonny's Blues,'" *SSF*, 19 (1982), 371.