

# *Narrative Voice and Blues Expression in James Baldwin's Sonny's Blues*

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## ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a formal analysis of *Sonny's Blues* while it intends to avoid the traditional moral readings of the story. Using textual criteria, this essay proposes an initial analysis of the cohesion and coherence of James Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues*, as a preliminary step to revealing the direct confrontation between the narrator's linguistic discourse, his dense verbal network, and Sonny's wordless blues music. The story presents the transition from the narrator's powerful «I», which hides his detachment from real life behind a deceptive discourse, into the exposition of Sonny's silenced story, a story which is told in the marginal echoes of the blues.

James Baldwin's celebrated short story, *Sonny's Blues*, written around 1948 and revised some years later, was first published in 1957, when its author was already a renowned writer. In this long short story, Baldwin endows with narrative personality the two divergent types visible in the Afro-American society of the 1940s. On the one hand, the narrator —Sonny's elder brother— represents the black urban professional, a member of the middle class whose desire for safety ends up in assimilationist beliefs and practices. On the other hand, Sonny, the blues player, emerges as the representative of the low-class, underground youngsters who try to survive in the darkest corners of the Harlem ghetto, in a world dominated by drugs and unemployment.

Most critics have traditionally analyzed *Sonny's Blues* from the point of

view of the final resolution of its central conflict: the lack of understanding between the middle-class narrator and his drug addict brother, Sonny.<sup>1</sup> These critics generally contend that the moral issue in the story is finally resolved; in this resolution, the blues would function as the source of brotherly communion and comprehension. Leaving the moral issue aside, this article proposes to study—with the help of text linguistic criteria<sup>2</sup>—the underlying confrontation between the narrator's controlled and rationalistic point of view, and Sonny's passionate, creative, and self-consuming view of life. The main focus will be the different means and levels of perception of reality contained in the discourse that both characters generate.

In the analysis of this linguistic fabric displayed by Sonny and his brother, I propose to focus on two of the seven standards of textuality outlined by de Beaugrande and Dressler in *Introduction to Text Linguistics*: namely, *cohesion* and *coherence* (Cf. Halliday and Hasan, 1976). As the authors indicate, these two elements are text-centered; on the contrary, the standards of *intentionality* and *acceptability* are mainly psychological and user-centered, while *informativity*, *situationality* and *intertextuality* are prominently social and computational. *Cohesion*, the most «text-oriented» of the seven standards of textuality, is defined by de Beaugrande and Dressler as

the ways in which the components of the surface text, i.e., the actual words we hear or see, are mutually connected within a sequence. The surface components depend upon each other according to grammatical forms and conventions, such that cohesion rests upon grammatical dependencies. (1981:3)

The cohesion of a surface text is usually maintained by «fitting elements into short-range grammatical dependencies» (1981:54) in such a way that the sequential connectivity between all the elements is recoverable. Among the multiple procedures for upholding cohesion are recurrence, partial recurrence, parallelism, paraphrase, ellipsis and the use of pro-forms.

*Coherence* subsumes, on the other hand, the procedures by which the conceptual connectivity is maintained. It is defined by de Beaugrande and Dressler as «the ways in which the components of the *textual world*, i.e., the configuration of *concepts* and *relations* which underlie the surface text, are *mutually accessible* and *relevant*» (1981:4). Basically, a text makes sense because there is a continuity between the configuration of concepts and relations which appear in the surface text and the reader's prior knowledge of the world. This continuity is the foundation of coherence (1981:84). The procedures which secure the coherence of a text include logical relations (such as causality and class inclusion), and knowledge of how events, actions and situations are organized.

## I

The foregrounding of some elements displayed in *Sonny's Blues* to maintain the cohesion and coherence of the text will reveal some important aspects in the discursive opposition between the narrator and his brother, Sonny. A close reading of the opening lines shows the narrative control Sonny's brother keeps over the story. The first paragraph strikes the reader with its carefully balanced structure. The discourse flows between the «I» of the first person narrator and the yet undefined «it»: «I read about it in the paper ... I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again»<sup>3</sup>. The sequential connectivity makes itself evident in the recurrence and parallelism of these opening lines. Every one of the units of discourse seems to be placed according to a solidly prearranged order. Each sentence starts with the «I» of the narrator as its control center, followed by the verb in second place and a pro-form at the end. The recurrence of the pro-forms «I» and «it» provides the text with a solid stability.

From the point of view of coherence, the conceptual connectivity is also firmly maintained. The connection between the «I» and the «it» is sustained through verbs which imply perception —*read, stare*— and a somewhat hesitant reaction —«couldn't believe». It is only when the reader's attention focuses on the «it» that the coherence of the paragraph appears discontinued. The narrative voice exposes the pro-form *it* without co-reference. Leaving the mysterious *it* undefined, the narrator immediately links the whole scene to its spatial location. The introduction of clauses beginning with *in, at* and *on* appears meaningful mainly in that it supposes a deliberate avoidance of the «it». When this initial cataphora —«it» without the co-referent— is resolved, the information provided is lacking in informativity. «The newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story» (86) seemingly co-refers to the initial «it», but the preceding reference to the newspaper the narrator is reading diminishes the informativity of the two clauses.

The narrator's intentionality within the text is visible in his refusal to verbalize what lies behind the «it», thus restoring the continuity of the discourse, as well as in the obvious sequential and conceptual recurrence, and the constant use of pro-forms. As de Beaugrande and Dressler indicate, these techniques are usually deployed «above all in situations where stability and exactness of content can have important practical consequences» (1981:59). Obviously, the narrator is securing his feeling of stability through a discourse flooded with such images as parallelism, recurrence, and cataphora —images which imply stability through cyclical repetition. Behind such carefully built discourse, the real meaning lies undiscovered. By the end of the first paragraph, the reader feels dispossessed of the actual story.

Finally, the narration disregards the «it» and focuses on the narrator himself. «I was scared, scared for Sonny» implies a certain definition of the narrator in his reaction to the name, Sonny. By inference the reader can surmise that «Sonny» is «his name», the name spelled in the «newsprint». However, this open assertion of the narrator's reaction is carefully worded. The adjective, «scared», is repeated so that the sentence keeps the exact length of previous sentences. Once completed, it appears perfectly contained within the linguistic fabric, the net of words displayed by the narrator. The next statement, «He became real to me again», represents the first stage in the apprehension and presentation of the name, «Sonny», which has finally been admitted into the narration. However, the narrative voice blocks the reader's expectations again. «The story» which had previously been placed beside «his name» is now willfully postponed by the narrator. In the same way as the transition from «his name» into «Sonny» required the proper linguistic arrangement, the verbalization of «the story» is also delayed until a proper verbal expression is provided.

Instead of offering «the story» printed in the paper—a paper which the narrator can read, but the reader of *Sonny's Blues* cannot—, the narrator retreats into metaphoric language: «A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there all night long» (86). In using such language, he keeps the reader from witnessing his truthful reaction and offers a mere literary artifice. The narrator hides his emotion behind images that call attention to themselves mainly as poetic images instead of showing true sentiment. The narrator's detachment from Sonny's story is further emphasized through continuous statements about his refusal to believe and internalize the message. His refusal to see his middle-class position, his own safety and comfort—represented by the powerful discursive «I»—endangered by Sonny's terrible story, a story which lurks behind the «it», permeates the narrator's discourse.

Once the discourse has avoided the presentation of Sonny's story, the introduction of the past perfect tense in the last line of the paragraph gives way to a new vision. The narrator's sudden presentation of Sonny in earlier days also appears extremely balanced. The rhythm here is almost as controlled and proportioned as in poetry. Every sentence eventually opens with two attributes. Thus, «bright and open» and «gentleness and privacy» refer directly to the narrator's image of Sonny. Another symmetrical clause, «for peddling and using heroin», sums up the «story» the narrator refuses to believe, the «story» he has carefully embedded in his word fabric.

It is in this next paragraph that the narrator offers the reader the clue to understand the carefully structured beginning of the story. «I couldn't find any room for it inside me» accounts for the initial link between the «I» of the

narrator and external, spatial location: «in the subway...» Similarly, the recurrent «it» of the first and second paragraphs becomes easily explained when the reader relates it to the following statement: «I had had suspicions, but I didn't name them, I kept putting them away». Naming and its opposite, silencing, and also, hiding and rationalizing emotion through a web of words, have become a major motif in the story. The narrator rationalizes and composes his discourse to evade exposing Sonny's story or his own emotional response to it.<sup>4</sup> This initial displacement leaves the «I» of the narrator in a central position, while Sonny remains in silence; Sonny becomes «the other», the dark side of his brother.

## II

Keeping within the same limits of strongly mediated narration, the second major scene amplifies and dramatizes the opening of the story. One day, as the narrator finishes his classes at school, he focuses his attention on a boy «whistling a tune» outside. It is worth noticing the careful effort of the narrator to verbalize and explain the distant tune:

One boy was whistling a tune, 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. (88)

However, the narrator then turns his focus to the boy. The whole episode signals a new display of discursive control as the narrator tries to annul the legitimacy of the boy's entrance into the discourse. The description of the boy, coming before the actual encounter between narrator and addict, appears mediated by the narrator. He soon turns his approach to the boy into a new rejection of meaning. As before, the informativity is now mainly carried by figurative language, which again supposes a detachment from the boy: «But now, abruptly, I hated him. I couldn't stand the way he looked at me, partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child» (89). As Keith E. Byerman points out, «the narrator is offered knowledge, but he chooses to interpret the messenger rather than the message» (1988: 199-200). The narrator interposes between the boy's message and the reader—and also between that message and his own understanding of it. The narrator interferes and disrupts the boy's discourse by introducing despising remarks about him: «He grinned. It made him repulsive...» (88); «It [the sun] made his eyes look yellow and showed up the dirt in his kinked hair. He smelled funky» (89). As the narrator builds up his discourse, the boy is

displaced into the silent region of «the other»; he is forced to occupy Sonny's dark side.

Significantly, when the boy conveys important information, the narrator expresses his desire to listen but, contrarily, focuses on the music and conversation in a nearby bar. Neither the music («something black and bouncy») nor the conversation («she laughingly responded to something someone said to her») can be understood by the narrator. Nonetheless, he prefers that undefined «something» to the boy's clear and painful message. As a result, the reader is, again, deprived of «another» story.

The narrator's refusal to hear —and integrate into his narration— any unpleasant story finally creates a block between him and the world outside. Summing up his failure to understand the boy's message, the narrator rationalizes and reads his own misconception of Sonny's predicament: «Tell me», I said at last, «why does he want to die?» (91). But the rationalization is wrong. The narrator, in his attempt to impose his own verbal pattern upon the messenger, has failed to receive and interpret the message: «He looked at me in surprise. He licked his lips. 'He don't want to die. He wants to live. Don't nobody want to die, ever'» (91).

Another instance in which the narrator fails to understand, internalize, and react to a message comes when he sees his mother for the last time. His mother's plea to him to look after Sonny gets a shallow and deceiving answer: «'Mama,' I said, 'ain't nothing going to happen to you or Sonny. Sonny's all right. He's a good boy and he's got good sense'» (99). The superficiality of the answer makes it irrelevant even to his own mother, who voices her son's misunderstanding: «'It ain't a question of his being a good boy [...] nor of his having good sense'» (99). In view of the narrator's failure to understand the message, his mother tells him a story whose parallel with the actual situation of the narrator and Sonny is striking. This time, the narration flows free and unmediated. His mother's narration escapes the narrator's control: «There wasn't anything I [the narrator] could say» (100). Therefore, as soon as the story is finished, the narrator shows his unwillingness to get a message which has not been encoded according to his verbal pattern: «I guess I didn't want to believe this. I guess she saw this in my face» (101). As a result, the narrator's reaction to his mother's story is only a promise devoid of emotional content. The use of parallelism, as well as sequential and conceptual recurrence indicates the narrator's imposition of his verbal pattern to conceal true meaning: «I won't forget. [...] Don't you worry, I won't forget. I won't let nothing happen to Sonny» (101). One can surmise that, if the narrator had got the real meaning of his mother's account, there would be no need for the continuation of the narrative. It is precisely the narrator's failure to apprehend

his mother's story and draw a parallel with his own situation, that entails the continuation of the narrative.

### III

The next major scene introduces music as the central motif. As the narrator looks out of the window he hears a revival meeting taking place in the street. Quite significantly, the narration dwells generously on how a common suffering has induced the two singing women to address «each other as Sister» (111). By spreading activation,<sup>5</sup> the reader is made aware of the unfulfilled brotherhood between Sonny and the narrator. However, the major motif here is the singing and its magical power. The narrator, as ever before, makes use of his verbal pattern to rationalize the scene. Once the narration has logically encompassed the song, singers and listeners, the narrator undertakes the explanation of that singing. The figurative language that he puts on display again calls attention to itself and overshadows the experience. Given the narrator's previous misreadings, the reader finds his statements barely acceptable. For the reader, it is not easy to get the narrator's meaning in such literary artifice as:

The music seemed to soothe a poison out of them [the listeners]; 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. (111-112)

No preparation had been made for this reaction to the singing. Therefore, the reader can barely understand the whole imagery («soothe a poison», «first condition», «last [condition]») of the narrator's discourse. Instead of the emotional experience, the narrator creates a substitute text. Then he reads it—or writes it—to himself and the reader.

The whole scene is monitored by the narrator from the distance of his high window. The description centers on the «they» of the singers and the «they» of the «listening faces». The distance between the narrator and his brother materializes again as the narration continues: «Then I saw my brother standing on the edge of the crowd» (112). The position of the narrator regarding the street scene is very symbolic: «I stayed at the window, both relieved and apprehensive» (112). By spreading activation, the reader recalls the encounter between the narrator and the addict, or the story told to the narrator by his mother. All these are instances in which the narrator perceives the message only partially, as if from a distant window. This detachment elicits in him a sense of «relief», while the ominous nature of the partially received message accounts for his «apprehension».

The next scene dramatizes the confrontation between the narrator's separation from emotion and Sonny's approach to it. When Sonny tells his brother about his experience with heroin, the short discourse appears unbalanced, hesitant and broken, as if Sonny's experience were too real to be apprehended and contained in a steady discourse:

«When she was singing before,» said Sonny, abruptly, «her voice reminded me 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.» (113)

By spreading activation again, the reader recalls the narrator's literary account of «a great block of ice» that «kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins» (86). The similarity is clear, but the informativity is carried in the choice of words and structure. The narrator's statements are so poetically worded and constructed that they call attention to their literary value. The experience behind those words remains elusive.

As the dialogue between Sonny and his brother continues, the distance between them grows. Surprisingly for the narrator, Sonny dwells on the nature of suffering as a driving force, a creative impulse: «'While I [Sonny] was downstairs before, on my way here, listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through —to sing like that'» (114). Again, the message appears partially received and rationalized in the narrator's answer: «'But there is no way not to suffer— is there, Sonny?'» (114). Sonny's response is more honest and true to life: «'I believe not [...] But that's never stopped anyone from trying'» (114).

Suffering, which has been deliberately avoided by the narrator in his narration, is finally called forth and verbalized by Sonny. For him, suffering turns into a terrible force inside that has to be let out. Unlike the narrator, Sonny is utterly unable to control his emotion through words:

It's terrible sometimes inside, [...] that's what's the trouble. You walk these streets, black and funky, and there's not really a living ass to talk to, and there's nothing shaking, and there's no way of getting it out -that storm inside. You can't talk it and you can't make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize nobody's listening. So you've got to listen. You got to find a way to listen. (115)

The whole discourse relies on the presentation of «that storm inside» as its central image. The term «storm» carries high informativity in this context. By spreading activation, the reader understands it as a driving, uncontrolled force in a continuous, dialectic fight with a troubled mind. For Sonny, the only way

of dealing with «suffering» is to «try to get with it», that means embracing it instead of avoiding it, «and play it» at the risk of «drowning in it». The means of expressing that suffering, and its consequence, the «storm inside» is, as in much of Baldwin's fiction, the musical expression of the blues.

It is no wonder, then, that Sonny completes the exposition of his trouble without the intermission of the narrator. His whole discourse conveys important information, while the narrator's mandatory responses to it are devoid of informativity. Sonny's final exclamation fuses, in a perfect combination, a terrible communal suffering permeated with its underlying aesthetic value: «'All that hatred down there, [...] all that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart'» (117). This exclamation, coming at the end of Sonny's dialogue, strikes the reader with its spontaneity and its aesthetic value. However, unlike the narrator's discourse, it can be easily explained and understood with reference to Sonny's experience.

#### IV

The reversal of the roles of Sonny and narrator, with the narrator's verbliness overpowered by Sonny's emotional —although inarticulate— telling of his experience, reaches its climax in the visit to the bar. Significantly, the narrator retreats into a «dark corner». He is forced into the region of «the other», into an area of silence, while Sonny is led to his piano inside «the circle of light». As soon as the music starts, as Byerman points out (1988: 201), the narrator seems struck by a somewhat alien perception. His language becomes deep and insightful, as if he were understanding the musician in his intimate act of playing:

[...] *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.* (119)

Music appears here as the creative instrument the musician utilizes to control and express his internal chaos. The «terrible» resonances of the passage stem from the fact that such a «roar», generated in the region of «the other», is expressed without words. For a narrator who has, throughout the story, relied on his ability to verbalize and rationalize reality through words, the craft of the musician appears «terrible».

In his first chords on the piano, Sonny is doubtful. By spreading activation, the image of Creole asking Sonny «to leave the shoreline and strike out for deep

water» (120) clearly brings to mind the image of Sonny striving through music «to keep from drowning» (115) in his storm inside. As the second set begins, Sonny starts with an emblematic song, «Am I Blue». The spark is ignited in the faces of the listeners, except in the narrator's, who feels outside: «'I had the feeling that something had happened, something I hadn't heard'» (120).

The narrator strives to keep the music within the limits where he can control it. This, significantly, is the reason why he describes the performance as if it were a conversation, using verbs like «say», «answer», «talk back» and «comment». As Creole leads the band into the blues world, the coherence of the text is gradually displaced with the introduction of «we». The unexpected shift from the «I» of the first person narrator into the first person plural is very significant. As certain critics have pointed out,<sup>6</sup> this «we» may signal the narrator's understanding of Sonny's suffering, and the acceptance of his story into the narrator's discourse. A second possible reading might indicate the presence of the writer, Baldwin himself, in this «we», reminding us that taking the blues as a cultural matrix, art can be a release from «all this darkness».<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the story establishes multiple intertextual relationships with a long tradition of blues narrative in Afro-American fiction. Sonny is but a descendant of Sadness, the protagonist of Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*. This character has been considered as «the first blues figure in the Afro-American novel», (Bell, 1987:71). Like Sonny, Sadness survives by probing the depth of his soul and generating a tragic blues vision of life which, eventually, nurtures him. Richard Wright's «Black Boy» also appears as Sonny's literary ancestor. In *Black Boy*, Richard Wright's protagonist also searches his own soul while the blues echo everywhere. To Ralph Ellison's blues perception, the novel «evokes the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound» (1979:79). Several other intertextual connotations bring Sonny close to Sandy Williams, in Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, and the protagonist of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In all these blues stories, the power of the blues helps to unite the Afro-American people in their common suffering, while, at the same time, the tragic melodies actually nourish and fortify the solitary singers.

Nonetheless, in *Sonny's Blues* the communion between Sonny and his brother appears momentary. The optimistic and communal «we» soon turns into the «I» of the narrator again. And the discourse is carefully balanced as if the narrator were gradually recovering from the musical influence. He seems to sanction this interpretation when he affirms: «And I was yet aware that this was only a moment» (122). In this context, the last image is significant. The narrator orders a cocktail for Sonny; the mixture of scotch and milk is symbolic of «simultaneous

nurture and destruction to the system» (Byerman, 1988: 202). The narrator's reading of the drink as «the very cup of trembling» adds to the connotative senses of the image. In the Old Testament (Isaiah 51, 17) we read:

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.

The cup of scotch and milk becomes the cup of trembling, the cup of suffering which JHWH gave the people of Jerusalem so that they would suffer and redeem themselves. Sonny's acceptance of the cup implies his acceptance of suffering, while the milk contained in it could be read as the nourishment represented by his music. The narrator retakes his tendency to read events through his masterful use of language. That language appears sometimes too metaphoric to touch real experience, and other times, too controlled to let the real experience show. On the contrary, Sonny willfully accepts his suffering and offers it to his listeners as a sort of sacrifice, «at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death» (121).

## V

Baldwin finally completes his transition from the aseptic narrator, the masterful deceiver entrapped in his own web of words, into the passionate, self-consuming artist, the «hunger artist» whose driving desire to explore and express his suffering represents the first step to his own consumption. The story represents the resolution of the cataphoric beginning. The undefined «it» is made to co-refer with Sonny's story as a whole, thus keeping the cohesion and coherence of the story perfectly balanced. Similarly, the story also completes the transition from the narrator's «I» —a symbol of power and presence— into the «it» —which initially symbolized absence and silence. Once forced to place himself in the wordless area of the «it», the narrator is partially deprived of his articulate authorial voice, and the reader can hear the «roar» arising from the silenced region of the «other», of Sonny. The new kind of discourse that permeates the narrative as Sonny expresses his suffering shares some of the basic elements of blues music. It is a coded language that springs from suffering and seeks a communal response to the expression of the self.

The story parallels the historical reaction of the silenced Afro-Americans, who, when deprived of language and voice after they set foot on American soil, found their new means of expression in the field of music. The blues, together with the spirituals, jazz and gospel music, testify to the Afro-Americans' effort

to negotiate their position as silent «others». In *Sonny's Blues*, Baldwin presents blues music, a traditional form of marginal discourse, finally taking control over the narration and projecting the story towards the expression of the «sound of rage and weeping» (Baldwin, 1984: 216) of the Afro-American people.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Stanley Macebuh (1973); Harry L. Jones (1977); Shirley Anne Williams (1974); Michael Clark (1985).

<sup>2</sup> I rely mostly on the method proposed by de Beaugrande and Dressler in *Introduction to Text Linguistics* (1981) and de Beaugrande *Text, Discourse and Process. Toward a Multidisciplinary Science of Texts* (1980).

<sup>3</sup> *Sonny's Blues*, in James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 86. All further references to this work appear parenthesized in the text.

<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the narrator behaves like the anonymous journalists in Richard Wright's *Native Son* who refuse to expose Bigger's tragic story: «Only after he [Bigger] had acted upon feelings that he had had for years would the papers carry the story, *his story*» (Wright, 1963: 208).

<sup>5</sup> Elaborating on «spreading activation» de Beaugrande and Dressler observe that «when an item of knowledge is activated, it appears that other items closely associated with it in mental storage also become active» (1981:88).

<sup>6</sup> See John Reilly (1970) and Harry L. Jones (1977).

<sup>7</sup> The choice of words, with their religious connotations and universality, seems to go beyond the narrator's discourse as it has appeared throughout the story. On the other hand, Baldwin's language has ranged at this same religious level in much of his fiction. *Another Country*, *Blues for Mr. Charlie* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* are some of the novels in which Baldwin projects his conception of the blues as a form of secular religion among the Afro-American people.

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