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The importance of music and other themes in “Sonny’s Blues.”

The short story “Sonny’s Blues,” written by James Baldwin, is a powerful story that takes a deeper dive into the lives of African American communities and neighborhoods like Harlem. For example, by looking at the lives of two brothers, the story explores the effects of systematic racism, the complicated nature of African American identity, and the fight for self-expression, as well as self-identity, from the viewpoints of two brothers who have taken different ways in their lives. There are many viewpoints in connection to “Sonny’s Blues,” for example the importance of music in this culture and the important contributions music can bring to a community. James Baldwin uses literature and his writing skills to make his story more emotional and create a thought-provoking experience for the readers. Baldwin’s work has been constantly reviewed and analyzed since its publication in 1957. The story “Sonny’s Blues,” explores the difficulties for African American communities and explores these on a deeper level. This essay will examine the themes of music, laughter, as well as space in the story and will argue if Baldwin’s work presents a powerful and thought-provoking image of the African American experiences in America by using the critical viewpoints of James Nikopoulos, Maleda Belilgne, and John M. Reilly.

The first theme that stands out the most throughout the story is music, as it serves as a powerful image and metaphor for African American communities. Music plays a major role in “Sonny’s Blues,” and also fulfills the role as a metaphor for the African American experience in America. When analyzing Baldwin’s writing more closely, it shows how much he emphasizes the potential of music to unite people and create the feeling of a community. Maleda Belilgne claims in her text “Sonic Living: Space and the Speculative in James

Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues,' that the music in the story is a metaphor for the African American identity and their experiences. She further shares the idea that "music is used to imagine a world that is beyond the confines of the ghetto" (Belilgne 47), and also that with its help, music provides a way to go over all the obstacles and constraints African American people face in their daily lives in America.

James Baldwin uses music, also as a way to show self-expression and individualism in a group context. James Nikopoulos talks in his article "A Kind of Joy": Laughing and Grinning through "Sonny's Blues," about the role of music in Baldwin's story and argues that it works as a powerful symbol of self-expression. Nikopoulos also claims that music is there for people to claim their own identity in a society, which is very unfriendly and unwelcoming towards African Americans. He shows this in his article, "The act of performing is one of self-affirmation and self-determination, a means of celebrating one's unique identity in the face of oppressive social norms" (Nikopoulos 30).

In addition, music also helps to demonstrate the various ways in which cultural expression can be used as a way to rebel against social oppression. Nikopoulos talks about this in his article as he claims "Music serves as a form of resistance against social oppression, and as a means of asserting Black cultural identity" (Nikopoulos 30). To fight against this structural oppression, "Sonny's Blues," emphasizes how valuable cultural expression and the ability to transform artistic expression are.

The difficult link between someone's identity and the collective identity within an African American community is another topic that is getting represented by music. John M. Reilly talks about this in his article, as he says "Music represents the Black experience in its totality and the collective identity that emerges from this experience" (Reilly 21). In the novel, the characters use music as a way to connect and also to create a feeling of a collective identity for African American communities as they battle against conflicts.

In conclusion, the importance of music as a metaphor for the African American experience in America is emphasized by James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." He shows the value of communities, and the potential for change in cultural expression and experiences within African American communities through the image of music. The different viewpoints from Belilgne, Reilly, and Nikopoulos, provide thoughtful analysis of the different functions of music in "Sunny's Blues," and also how it affects the African American experiences in America.

Another big theme in Baldwin's story is laughter, as it plays a major part in the formation of relationships and also in giving a sense of community. Through laughter, the characters in the story can connect and also find joy even though they face so much adversity. John M. Reilly talks in his article " "Sonny's Blues": James Baldwin's Image of the Black Community," about the relevance of laughing and that it is a representation of the community. According to Reilly, laughing plays an important part in the experience of African American people in America, as he says "laughter is not just a form of amusement, but a means of bonding and sharing experiences" (Reilly 120).

Additionally, laughing is an easy way to get over boundaries between people and also promotes a sense of community. According to Reilly, "Laughter allows the characters to connect on a deeper level and to see each other as individuals, rather than simply as a member of a larger group" (Reilly 23). For this, laughing helps to eliminate obstacles and differences within African American communities, and helps to build relationships.

Nikopoulos also emphasizes the value of laughing in the story and shares the idea, that laughing is a way for African American people to deal with social discrimination and restrictions. He shares the opinion, that laughing is an essential part of the African American experience in America, as he says "a coping mechanism, a means of finding joy and meaning in a world that is often hostile and oppressive" (Nikopoulos 31).

Maleda Belilgne talks about laughter as a coping mechanism and a way to bond, she states in her article “Laughter can also be a form of denial, a means of avoiding the harsh realities of the world and the struggles that Black people face” (Belilgne 47). The characters in Baldwin’s story are frequently facing unpleasant or upsetting facts about themselves and also the society they’re living in, and one way to be able to escape all these traumatizing issues is by laughing. In conclusion, the theme of laughing plays a major role in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” as it highlights the value of laughing and humor within an African American community. He also points out the challenges involved in establishing laughter as a way to go about things and a way of connection or unity. The different viewpoints from Maleda Belilgne, John M. Reilly, and James Nikopoulos provide a very informative analysis of the relevance of laughter for African American people and their experience in America as well as its place in “Sonny’s Blues.”

The last theme which will be addressed and talked about is the theme of Spatial Relationships. Author Baldwin uses spatial relationships in his story as a crucial tool to explore complicated and tense relationships which exist within African American communities. Belilgne for example claims that to explore these tensions she says that “the spatial organization of the story reflects the complex and often fraught relationships that exist within the Black community” (Belilgne 48). She further suggests that Baldwin’s story “foregrounds the significance of space in shaping individual and collective experiences of Blackness” (Belilgne 43). The way a physical place can influence a community or someone’s identity is shown by how Harlem and other areas inside of it are presented in the story. The representation of the jazz club in “Sonny’s Blues,” as a place for community and artistic expression, helps to point out the importance of physical locations to help build and maintain the ties within African American communities. Nikopoulos talks about this in his article, as he says, “The jazz club is a space of possibility, where the characters can escape from the

difficulties and limitations of their daily lives and find connection through the shared experience of music” (Nikopoulos 33).

James Baldwin also highlights the difficulties and drawbacks associated with spatial relationships within African American communities. John M. Reilly mentions in his article that, “the story’s depiction of Harlem as a space of poverty, violence, and oppression highlights how physical space can be used as a means of controlling and subjugating Black individuals” (Reilly 26). For example, the story’s presentation of Sonny’s struggles with addiction and jail points out how physical limitations can make it very difficult for people to break out from the cycles of violence and poverty which exist within their communities.

In conclusion, James Baldwin’s examination of the spatial relationships in his story points out how closely identity, physical space, and community are connected in the African American experience. Further, he provides a very detailed and provocative investigation into the dynamics of race and also their location in American culture. Baldwin does this by presenting how physical environments can be able to both promote and restrict connections and displays of identity.

Overall, James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” is an in-depth and complex investigation of the African American experience in America, which touches on a variety of important topics, including community, music, laughing, spatial relationships, and identity. Baldwin provides a powerful representation of all the challenges as well as opportunities faced by African Americans. With the help of the well-created characters in his story and his descriptions of Harlem as well as the areas within it, he can achieve these powerful images and representations.

This paper has provided a deeper understanding of the different themes and meanings presented in “Sonny’s Blues,” by combining and connecting the insights of John M. Reilly, Maleda Belilgne, and James Nikopoulos. The paper shows how music serves as a powerful metaphor for African Americans and their American experience as it emphasizes the

importance of cultural expression and communities in battling social oppression. There is now a greater understanding of the complex lives of African Americans in their American experience, and gives the readers a better view of Baldwin's storytelling. His insights on how music, laughter, and spatial relationships work within the story have to be appreciated. In the end, the story "Sonny's Blues," is there to show the power of writing as it manages to put a light on the human experience and provide an explanation for the challenges and difficulties, underrepresented cultures have to face. James Baldwin's work presents a vision of possibilities and optimism through his characters as they battle different challenges. These complex investigations of dynamics within African American cultures are crucial because this topic is still relevant today as it was when it first got published.

#### Works Cited

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Sonic Living: Space and the Speculative in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues", by Maleda Belilgne.