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My Cup Runneth Over

The Evolution of Acceptance in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

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The greatest gift of literature is the mirror it provides for us to see ourselves both as we are and who we can be.

James Baldwin, one of the most prolific writers of the 20th century, was a creative advocate of this method, as demonstrated in his writing.

Sonny's Blues, one of Baldwin's most widely read and discussed short stories, asks the reader to consider provocative questions when it comes to the messages Baldwin conveys through the story of the relationship between Sonny, a talented musician struggling with a heroin addiction and his brother, who is never named yet clearly shown as the opposite of Sonny regarding personality and stability.

As with many writers with a religious foundation, Baldwin intersperses Biblical language and references throughout the story, ending with a scene in a jazz club of the brother (also story narrator) describing Sonny reaching for a glass of Scotch and milk, a drink he sent to congratulate Sonny at the end of his musical set: "For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother's head like the very cup of trembling"

Using this Biblical image as referenced in the "cup of trembling," my research contends the cup reference is specific to the evolution of acceptance for Sonny and his brother, of not only each other but themselves. I assert this acceptance is an unexplored area in relationship to Baldwin's own challenges with living authentically in 20th century America: a homosexual, African American man who loved a country with a history of conflicted love for him and his peers. By focusing on acceptance in this regard, the theme of redemption through vulnerability is shown as the true "savior" in *Sonny's Blues*.



Consider

1. Does true acceptance involve the world as well as one's own specifics?
2. Does free will truly exist or are we another's keeper?
3. How can someone be accepted for who he is while holding him accountable for his actions? Is this a conflict of principle?
4. Define acceptance

Reflect

1. Baldwin uses the sibling relationship as a metaphor for the world: i.e. unnamed brother serves as the world as Sonny, representing humanity, struggles in his search for acceptance.
2. *Sonny's Blues* contends obligation seemingly motivates brother yet true love for his sibling ends the breach.
3. Interestingly, Sonny never speaks of any disappointment with his brother, only himself. Brother, conversely, focuses on Sonny's shortcomings until personal tragedy forces self-reflection on his part.
4. When we give others permission to live authentically, we foster an environment of growth and truth.

Baldwin's America

Baldwin's life work focused on the struggles between people of color, namely men, and their connection with the larger society they were a part of. As a queer man, Baldwin undoubtedly struggled with acceptance within his personal community as well, as society's ideals of "masculinity" chafed with reality. As a way to process his journey, and perhaps provide hope for others, Baldwin contributed in the way he was best gifted: through writing.

Why "Sonny's Blues" Is A Lesson for Humanity

When we make a decision to accept others for who they are, not who we believe they should be, the gift we receive is more tolerance and understanding for ourselves as well. In the story, brother's epiphany comes when he acknowledges that he cannot be a part of a world that does not accept Sonny, in all he is, for this world cannot exist without Sonny.