

“Sonny’s Blues” and Cultural Shadow

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Once Joseph Henderson opened up the conceptual territory of a cultural unconscious, psychological frameworks such as archetypes, complexes, shadow, and integration became ways of thinking about cultural unconsciousness. Literature, too, addresses this dimension. Because it draws on the unconscious for materials, imaginative literature offers cultures what dreams offer dreamers—images and narratives potent with possible consciousness. Reading these narratives through Jungian frameworks can offer insight about integrating cultural unconscious materials—a valuable contribution Jungian thought could make to the 21st century. For Americans, one of the classic fictions depicting such a path is James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues."

American cultural shadow, a realm of unconsciousness so threatening and multifarious as to demand our most intense attention, has from the beginning been rife with racism practiced against people of color, beginning with the near extermination of the peoples living on the American continent prior to the European immigration. Samuel Kimbles underscores the unreconstructed form originating in slavery: "Moral conflict in the larger society related to race relations is an open cultural wound, a continuation of dynamics from slavery that gets replayed daily in race relations in current society. . ." (207). A continuous enabler of American racism has been the American posture of innocence. Flying under various flags of righteousness, racism has festered and thrived in American culture's unconscious psyche while it has been and continues to be acted out in myriad forms of injustice in society.

The African-American writer James Baldwin was a tireless seer who tried again and again to remove the blinders from American eyes. In essays such as *Notes of a Native Son* and *The Fire Next Time* he unflinchingly depicts the reciprocal hatred incited by racism. He details the murderous rage that not being seen as a real individual human being incites, writes of a "cosmic vengeance" (105) brewing. How amazing, moving, it is then, when he suggests at the end of *The Fire Next Time* that consciousness might save Americans, black and white (105). Baldwin makes his own contribution to this redemptive aspiration in "Sonny's Blues," a portrait of the psychologically transformative power of an artist dealing

consciously with both his personal shadow and with the racism in America's cultural shadow.

The story opens with the narrator reading in the newspaper that his brother, Sonny, a jazz piano player, is in jail for selling drugs, then staring into the subway window. There he sees his own reflection "trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (86), Baldwin's framing image of entrapment in cultural shadow.

The narrator's responses to reading about his brother's jailing reveal two of his vulnerabilities that the story will follow. First, he acknowledges that Sonny "became real to me again" (86). Sonny's brother's personal shadow is characterized as not experiencing others as *real*. This flaw is fed by another weakness—his inability to cope with his feelings. Suddenly thinking of Sonny as "real," the narrator is so gripped with fear for him that he is seized by physical pain.

Baldwin immediately contextualizes his character to convey that his difficulties are representative. His struggle with his feelings, Baldwin claims, is part of the price of growing up male in Harlem. He makes this claim through having the narrator, an algebra teacher, compare his students to Sonny and himself, beginning with his students' fury at being deprived of realistic hope: "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. They were filled with rage" (87).

He recognizes this rage in how his students treat one another. After the day's classes have ended, he sits in his classroom, attending to the sounds the boys make as they escape school: "I listened to the boys . . . shouting and cursing and laughing. Their laughter . . . was mocking . . . its intent to denigrate. . . . Perhaps I was listening to them because I was thinking about my brother and in them I heard my brother. And myself" (87-8).

Through these and similar comparisons, Baldwin claims the narrator's and Sonny's lives are representative of the collective suffering of racism experienced by young black males growing up in the Harlem of mid-twentieth-century America.

They—the narrator, Sonny, and all the boys—are posed with how to deal with the feelings aroused by American racism. They have the cultural and psychological work of carrying the rage and pain caused by it. "Sonny's Blues" describes two patterns of response in the lives of the two brothers.¹

The narrator copes by dissociating. Consequently, he fails to reach out to Sonny even though he had promised his mother he would take care of him. He made this promise after she told him the story of the random murder of an uncle he hadn't known he had, his father's brother. After a night of guitar-playing and dancing, this uncle ran down a hill onto a road in sheer good spirits to the affectionate amusement of the narrator's father. A car full of drunk white men, for "fun," (100) aimed their car at him and killed him. She tells him, "Your father says he heard his brother scream when the car rolled over him, and he heard the wood of

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that guitar when it give . . . and he heard them white men shouting, and the car kept on a-going and it ain't stopped till this day" (100). This story not only initiates the narrator into one of his family's experiences of racist atrocity; he is shown that his family participates in the historic line of black suffering of racist atrocities in America.

His father paid the psychological price for this particular atrocity in the emergence of his own personal shadow. Describing his response to the murder, the narrator's mother says, "Your Daddy never did really get right again. Till the day he died he weren't sure but that every white man he saw was the man that killed his brother" (100-01). Her husband's outrage at the racist murder of his brother locked him in racism, in suspicion of the murderous possibilities of all white people because they *were white*.

Baldwin insists that America's cultural shadow of racism infects both persecutor and victim, in fact insists that one of the most persecutory effects of racism is the engulfing of its victims in rage and hatred.

In spite of his promise to his mother to protect Sonny, his brother does not make a move to contact him while he is in jail until a tragic event occurs that his habitual denial won't let him ignore. His daughter, Grace, dies, unable to breathe, of polio. His wife's internalization of their daughter's suffocation breaks through the narrator's emotional armor repeatedly. He confesses, "Isabel will sometimes wake me up with a low, moaning, strangled sound and I have to be quick to awaken her and hold her to me and where Isabel is weeping against me seems a mortal wound" (110). After his daughter's burial, that very day, he finally writes Sonny. As he says, "My trouble made his real" (110). Sonny answers, letting him know how much he had been needing contact. This exchange leads to Sonny's coming to live with him after he is released.

Sonny's is the other pattern of response to the Harlem male's cultural and psychological work of carrying rage and pain caused by American racism that Baldwin depicts in this story. Sonny is the emotional heir of the dead uncle he knows nothing about. He loves music and turns to playing jazz on the piano to cope with his feelings. He also, however, turns to drugs so that he is simultaneously trying to feel and not feel his suffering. His years with drugs are intertwined with his playing, and his brother consequently hates his music, blames it for leading Sonny into addiction.

Sonny tries to explain to him that music is not the problem, that suffering is the problem. Baldwin explores Sonny's inner world in depth in a conversation between him and his brother. This conversation occurs within a context of the transforming power of music that Baldwin has established as a motif throughout the story. An extended scene developing this motif occurs immediately before their conversation.

Sonny's brother looks out the window and sees Sonny watching three women and a man with a tambourine singing revival music on the street, a performance that "seemed to soothe the poison out of" the listeners. (98-99)

Sonny begins the subsequent conversation by inviting his brother to come hear him play that night. During the course of their talk, his brother asks Sonny whether he is liable to return to drugs. Sonny answers, "Me While I 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. It's *repulsive* to think you have to suffer that much" (114).

In these words of protest, Sonny names the magic in music—its capacity to transform suffering. But he rebels against the necessity of suffering. Unlike his brother, he's in a position to protest because he has never been able successfully to repress it. He has tried every way he could think of to cope with it. As he says, "You try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it . . . and to make it seem—well, like you. Like you did something, all right, and now you're suffering for it. You know? . . . Maybe it's better to do something to give it a reason, *any* reason" (115). This passage hints of Sonny's possible capacity to integrate his own psychic shadow material. He prefers being responsible to being a victim, even though he realizes that this desire is a desire for control and that suffering may in fact not have reasonable explanations.

Trying to explain his struggle with suffering, Sonny plunges into the revelation of his personal shadow. He has discovered the ways he is a horrible person, and he has owned them. Sitting down as if "all the wind had suddenly been knocked out of him," he admits, "Sometimes you'll do *anything* to play, even cut your mother's throat . . . Or your brother's . . . Or your own" (116). After this stunning admission that he knows he's capable of matricide, fratricide, and suicide, he reassures his brother, *but not on the grounds that he's no longer capable of murder. He reassures him on the grounds that he knows who he is.* "Don't worry. I'm all right now and I think I'll be all right. But 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" (116).

His brother dares to ask the question. "What have you been, Sonny?" Not looking at him, Sonny answers:

I've been something I didn't recognize, didn't know I could be.
Didn't know anyone could be. . . . I don't know how I played . . .
but I know I did awful things, those times, sometimes, to people.
Or it wasn't that I *did* anything to them—it was that they weren't
real. (116)

Baldwin again zeros in on the basis of human cruelty in unconsciousness, in this case unconsciousness of the reality of the other. Sonny grasps what his brother does not: treating other people as if they are not real is "awful." It turns one into

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“something” one doesn’t know one “could be,” a potential killer of even one’s nearest and dearest.

Trying to communicate experiences that he acknowledges in their depth are not communicable, he continues:

I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it *My stink ... I thought I'd die if I couldn't get away from it and yet . . . I knew everything I was doing was just locking me in with it.* (116-17)

Caught in his own stink, Sonny discovers the philosopher's stone. He says, "I didn't know. . . something kept telling me that maybe it was good to smell your own stink, but I didn't think that *that* was what I'd been trying to do—and—who can stand it?" (117).

In his discovery of his personal shadow, Sonny has been able not only to make conscious his own baseness, but has grasped that knowledge of his own baseness is somehow “good.” He has, without knowing it, found the escape hatch from the prison of victimization that social oppressions, such as racism, are liable to trap one in. One of the great problems of being on the receiving end of racial oppression is that it poses yet one more obstacle to recognizing and owning one’s personal shadow. The facts are that in a racist society, a person of color does suffer injustice, and therefore it is all the more tempting to excuse one’s behavior as having been caused by those injustices. Caught in that attitude, one is tempted not to take responsibility for oneself, not to recognize and own one’s personal shadow. Jung warned, “So long as [one] can think that somebody else . . . is responsible for his difficulties,” he will live in an illusion of psychological unity. To escape that illusion one must realize that “he himself has a shadow, that his enemy is in his own heart . . .” (*Psychology of the Transference*, p. 198, para. 399). It is precisely that recognition that allows one to join the rest of the human race as an equal in the capacity to do evil.

Socially, one might be blameless for the wrongs wreaked on one, as Sonny and the narrator are blameless for having been born into the racist social conditions of their youth, but psychologically, just as Sonny recognizes his own potential for murder, one recognizes kinship with the ruthless immorality of the oppressor. It does not follow that one would or should cease resistance to oppression; only that one would no longer be trapped in the resentment and hatred that flows from seeing evil only in the other. Sonny, having faced his own stink, has the possibility of bringing the transformative magic of shadow integration to his piano-playing.

Sonny's ensuing musical performance is presented as an opportunity for transformation not only of the musician, but also of his listeners. What Sonny achieves, an entire audience may achieve. Having agreed to come hear him play,

Sonny's brother watches Sonny struggle at the piano to reach the place within where he can transform sorrowful feelings into music. He says, "Sonny moved, deep within, exactly like someone in torment. I had never before thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. . ." Sonny brings all his experience with him, including his abysmal knowledge of both racism and of himself. He is faced with trying to express his feelings about what it means to continue to live as a shadowed man in an unjust world, to try to make art from that place.

And then he does. Baldwin describes how the band and its leader, Creole, help Sonny find his way. In this description, Baldwin affirms the role of human community in personal transformation. Sonny needs others, not only Creole and his band, who have made the journey, but also the long line of artists who have turned suffering into blues. Baldwin claims that the message of the blues is the message of life. Sonny and the band were playing blues, in his words,

at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death . . . to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer . . . are delighted, and . . . may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. . . it's the only light we've got in all this darkness. (121)

Creole and the band have introduced the universality of the journey, its archetypal quality, but then one's way is one's own, never having existed before, never to exist again. Baldwin envisions the artist and his art as individuated. Jazz captures the interplay between the universal and the individual. To play jazz, one takes the musical harvest one has been given and makes something new, using one's own realized life as the unique ingredient. Creole, a master of this relationship, gives the nod to Sonny and steps back as if to say, "Now these are Sonny's Blues" (121).

For Sonny's brother, listening becomes numinous with understanding. He says:

Sonny's fingers filled the air with . . . his life . . . that . . . contained so many others. . . beautiful because . . . no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. (122)

The offering Sonny has is the consciousness with which he has encountered suffering, the "burning" with which he has "made it his." Sonny's having reflected upon his own role in his suffering enables him to play his blues without *lament*. He can experience pain without the entrapments, such as bitterness and helpless self-pity, that characterize lament. Sonny's self-knowledge allows him to feel the paradoxical freedom that comes from assuming responsibility, even in an unjust world, for who he is and has been.

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And his "triumph" potentially becomes ours. Sonny, through his music, offers his listeners his suffering so lived through as to become a kind of communicable freedom. Listening to him play, Sonny's brother senses this possible liberation: "Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen . . ." (122).

The freedom Sonny's brother is glimpsing is not simply personal. He thinks of Sonny as having become a lightning rod for the suffering of his family all the way back to the arrival of black people in America: "He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy" (122). The shadow with which Sonny is struggling is not only his, but that of American racism. Thus it brings to his brother's mind "the moonlit road where my father's brother died," (122) and the suffering of his mother. Sonny's blues free his brother to experience this heritage of suffering of America's cultural shadow of racism without lament. They also enable him to slip free for a moment from his pattern of denial and repression. In his words, "[Sonny's blues] brought something else back to me, and *carried me past it* [my italics]. I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again and I felt my own tears begin to rise" (122). Thus Sonny's brother is freed to feel his own pain cleansed of lament.

Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" contains a portrait of an artist who having integrated personal shadow is able to integrate suffering caused by cultural shadow, transforming rage and pain into blues capable of helping psychologically free his listeners. Baldwin doesn't offer a way to destroy America's cultural shadow or suffering. In fact, the narrator concludes his description of his epiphany with an assertion of more suffering to come. He says: "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" (122). The struggle of integrating shadow, personal and cultural, full of suffering and potential freedom, is rendered as never-ending.

Focusing on psyche, not Jung, Baldwin's story offers a portrait of the process Jung in his writings identified as individual integration of personal shadow. Baldwin shows integration of personal shadow as a passage toward artistic rendering of the suffering of cultural shadow without lament. This rendering is portrayed as having the power to help liberate listeners from the emotional entrapments the cultural shadow has spawned. "Sonny's Blues" through the art of imaginative literature attempts the same for Baldwin's readers. Assuming the 21st century will be comparable to the 20th in terms of cultures acting out our unconsciousness in terrible ways, we need Baldwin's vision.

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Notes

- ¹ The women characters in "Sonny's Blues" lack anger, and are portrayed as trying to hold people together, both psychologically and socially.