

Close Reading and Cultural Specificity: Teaching “Sonny’s Blues” in Korea*

Eui Young Kim

[Abstract]

This essay shares my experience of teaching James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” in an “Introduction to English Literature” course, offered to second-year English majors at a Korean university. The cultural barrier between my students and the narrative world of “Sonny’s Blues” is high. Yet my students’ unfamiliarity with the codes of US race relations can be turned into a pedagogical asset. I teach the story over three weeks, focusing on three elements of fiction: point of view, setting, and plot. Teaching how to close read has proven to be an effectual way to help my students appreciate the cultural specificity of the story. The first week is devoted to exploring the unnamed narrator’s flaw. His character flaw is linked to his inability to provide the readers with a clear view of Sonny. The second week is spent exploring the urban ghetto as social space. When students begin noticing the importance of the setting, they are asked to link the social logic of Harlem to the dominant emotion in the narrator’s psyche—fear. In the final week, the students examine bebop as a situated cultural expression against racism. By momentarily relieving the narrator of the fear that led to his judgmental aloofness, Sonny’s performance allows the brothers to overcome their alienation. I conclude that paying attention to textual

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details can begin to redress the universalizing tendency that has dominated “Sonny’s Blues” scholarship for decades.

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1. Introduction

James Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues” was published in 1957 and remains to date his most anthologized work. Because “Sonny’s Blues” is well-crafted, it is frequently assigned in introductory college literature courses. Selecting, teaching, and writing about the story in this context “tend to focus on the universal themes and appeals of ‘Sonny’s Blues’” (Francis 81). Indeed, one of the earliest published articles on teaching this text overtly advises against bringing up the issue of race in class. In his 1978 article, Jay Bruce Jacoby writes, “In teaching ‘Sonny’s Blues,’ I have found that an initial discussion of Baldwin, the Black experience in America, or the question of Black identity is often the quickest way to turn off students” (2). Instead, he asks his students to concentrate on the universal theme of music.

This focus on music is a persistent trend in the critical reception of “Sonny’s Blues.” John M. Reilly’s 1970 treatment of the story identifies “the Blues as a key metaphor” and argues that the story is about music above all else (56). From Reilly’s argument, it only takes a few logical steps to arrive at Edward Lobb’s reading. In his 1979 essay, Lobb begins by acknowledging the importance of Reilly’s contribution. He follows up that acknowledgement with the statement, “But the meaning of the blues is, as I hope to show, rather wider than Reilly seems to think” (143). Baldwin is concerned about “the nature and function of art” in general (143). This assumption

allows Lobb to argue that the social problems encountered by the characters, “the poverty, the lack of a future, the dope, the seemingly impenetrable wall of white racism” are in fact “simply aspects of the larger terror of existence in a universe devoid of meaning” (143). Lobb successfully washes the story out of all social and political implications. The comforting thought that Lobb’s essay was published in the seventies and therefore reflects the time in which it was written is shattered when one encounters essays such as Radiclan Clytus’s “Paying Dues and Playing the Blues: Baldwin’s Existential Jazz” in the recently published *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin*. In the said essay, Clytus proposes to examine the “implications beyond the ontology of black life” in “Sonny’s Blues” and proceeds to read the story next to Jean-Paul Sartre (72).

This universalizing tendency is problematic because not only does it allow critics to elide the issue of race, but it also obstructs the formal analysis of the story. In the seminal essay that initiated this line of discussion, Reilly makes this startling observation:

The Blues is an art in process and in that respect alien from any conception of fixed and ideal forms. This will not justify weaknesses in an artist’s work, but insofar as Baldwin identifies his writing with the art of the singers of Blues it suggests why he is devoted to representation, in whatever genre, of successive moments of expressive feeling and comparatively less concerned with achieving a consistent overall structure. (59)

There are at least two assumptions that need to be critically examined in this passage. The assumption that the blues is “alien from any conception of fixed and ideal forms” is clearly based on a misunderstanding of black music.¹⁾ The second claim that Baldwin is devoted to the representation of “successive moments of

expressive feeling and comparatively less concerned with achieving a consistent overall structure” is highly debatable and certainly does not apply to “Sonny’s Blues,” as my discussion in the following pages will more than sufficiently demonstrate.²⁾ Another critic, who has accepted the centrality of the blues motif in too literal a fashion, argues that Baldwin’s use of the song “Am I Blue” in the last section of the story is a structural flaw. Richard N. Albert’s reason for making this argument is that “Am I Blue” was written by white composers for the film musical *On with the Show!* The fact that Ethel Waters, rather than Bessie Smith, sang the song is also viewed as a problem (Albert 182-84). Once again, Albert’s discussion is based on superficial notions of the kind of music Sonny plays in the culminating scene. Sonny is a bebopper, and it is common practice in bebop to take existing tunes—even tin pan alley musical themes—and improvise. There is nothing “inappropriate” about Baldwin’s use of “Am I Blue” (Albert 184), and by no stretch of the imagination can his choice of the song be interpreted as a structural flaw. What these discursive instances reveal is that the focus on music tends to divert the critic’s attention away from the specificity of the story on both thematic and formal levels.

Meanwhile, instructors have continued to write about the experience of teaching “Sonny’s Blues.” One common practice is to pair the text with some other text that reflects a very different cultural context. Susan Robbins pairs Baldwin’s story with James Joyce’s “Araby” to help students reflect on their relationship with authority figures. In both stories, she argues, her students recognize and appreciate “narratives that lead through anger and anguish to understanding or freedom” (61). Thaddeo K. Babiha pairs “Sonny’s Blues” with Ernest Gaines’s “The Sky Is Gray” to show his students that “if they develop a love for reading, they will never be lonely” (119). This state of the field prompts Conseula Francis to remark somewhat drily:

Pedagogical arguments like these have little interest in the craft of “Sonny’s Blues” or in its place in the African American literary tradition (or any other tradition for that matter). They are primarily interested in the pedagogical work this story performs in the classroom, and as this story is used quite often in the classroom, this is a significant thread in “Sonny’s Blues” scholarship. (89)

This essay is yet another contribution to this significant thread in “Sonny’s Blues” scholarship, yet it argues that paying attention to textual details can begin to redress the universalizing tendency that has dominated the critical discussion for decades. In my experience, “Sonny’s Blues” can be returned to its particular place and time when students are asked to adhere to the basics of close reading. Such work has been performed, perhaps surprisingly, in my “Introduction to English Literature” course designed for sophomores majoring in English at a Korean university. My students’ unfamiliarity with the codes of US race relations makes it somewhat easier to approach the issue of race in class. There is no emotional baggage that needs to be worked through or carefully steered away from.³⁾

I teach “Sonny’s Blues” over three weeks. This may initially seem to be too slow a pace at which to read a single story, but “Sonny’s Blues” is “a longish short story” (Clark 197). It is, in fact, the second longest piece of prose fiction included in the textbook I use: *The Norton Introduction to Literature*. Baldwin’s elaborate prose style makes this text a difficult read for students for whom English is a second language, a condition that justifies the reading pace. The primary reason for spending three weeks on the story, however, is to explore in depth the author’s intricate use of three elements of fiction: point of view, setting, and plot. This breakdown is in line with one of the objectives of the course, which is to survey the basic concepts of literature.

2. The Flawed Narrator

James Baldwin's short story is narrated through the viewpoint of Sonny's elder brother. The unnamed narrator is a high school math teacher upholding middle-class values. He is, in short, someone who feels threatened by Sonny's way of life. Sonny is a jazz pianist and, as the opening of the story reveals, a heroin addict. The narrator encounters the news of Sonny's arrest on his way to work, and the first four paragraphs of the story follow his inner struggles as he desperately attempts to ignore the news. In fact, it takes a while for first-time readers to discover that "this is a brother speaking of his brother's arrest" (Harris 105). I often start the first session by analyzing the first four paragraphs to alert my students to Baldwin's deft use of the first-person singular narration. In this case, the narrator's extreme defensiveness obscures our view of Sonny's character, and this interference makes the narrator's presence palpable. In the first week, I frame the narrator's emotional defense mechanism as a flaw, something that the readers need to judge in order to resist the narrator's point of view.

To further explore the narrator's character, I ask my students to re-read the encounter between the narrator and "the boy," an old neighborhood friend of Sonny's. I hand out a worksheet with a set of questions for the students to answer. Who is the boy? What are his external features? How does the narrator feel about the boy? Why do you think he feels this way? My students will usually come up with partial answers to these questions instead of examining the full spectrum of details provided in the passage. For example, my students will notice that the boy's eyes are yellow and his hair is dirty, yet most of them fail to recognize that he is a junkie. My students also struggle with the narrator's reaction to the boy's visit. The narrator is initially angry, but then feels guilty, and finally feels like crying. The

variety of his emotional reactions and the speed at which one replaces the other completely baffle my students. Only when all the details are taken into account and placed in context do my students begin to see the difference in social standing as the underlying cause of the narrator's emotional turmoil. When this disparity sinks in, I point out the central irony of the scene. While the boy speculates on any possible contribution he may have made to Sonny's addiction, Sonny's brother reacts in the opposite manner. That is, the boy shows signs of greater empathic capacity.

After letting my students respond to the set of questions I prepared for them, I direct their attention to this moment in the two characters' conversation.

"I never *give* Sonny nothing," the boy said finally, "but a long time ago I come to school high and Sonny asked me how it felt." He paused, I couldn't bear to watch him, I watched the barmaid, and I listened to the music which seemed to be causing the pavement to shake. "I told him it felt great." The music stopped, the barmaid paused and watched the juke box until the music began again. "It did."

All this was carrying me some place I didn't want to go. I certainly didn't want to know how it felt. It filled everything, the people, the houses, the music, the dark, quicksilver barmaid, with menace; and this menace was their reality. (107)

Here the boy articulates his concern. He is worried that the answer he gave to young Sonny's question may have played a role in Sonny's first dalliance with drugs. This suspicion has pushed the boy to come searching for the narrator. We know that this is an unusual behavior because the narrator introduces the boy as a fixture in the old neighborhood: "even though he was a grown-up man, he still hung around that block, still spent hours on the street corners, was always high and raggy" (105). For once he has snapped out of his customary lethargy; Sonny's arrest has made him

uncomfortable enough to seek out someone to talk to. The boy, however, has chosen the wrong person. Sonny's brother "certainly didn't want to know how it felt" because the menace represented by drugs was "their reality." The vehemence of that possessive adjective "their" reflects the degree to which the narrator feels threatened by the said reality. Although he wants to believe that it is "their" reality, the truth is that his escape is far from certain. It is not difficult to deduce that he is angry at Sonny for bringing that menace so close to his door. In the same vein, he is initially angry at the boy for showing up at his workplace. He wants the two worlds to stay apart. This emotional defense mechanism leads to a willful denial of sympathy throughout this encounter. At the end of their conversation, the narrator concludes, "He must want to die, he's killing himself, why does he want to die?" (108). This causes the boy to look at him in surprise. Then the boy replies, "He don't want to die. He wants to live. Don't nobody want to die, ever" (108). Reminiscent of the fool in Shakespeare's plays, this junkie teaches the high school teacher a lesson. What the boy says is true of all human beings, including those that actually kill themselves. Perhaps the boy is in a better position to know this due to his direct experience. Nevertheless, the narrator is Sonny's brother. His failure to extend sympathy and love to Sonny reveals a flaw in his character, which in turn translates into his inability to serve as a transparent lens for the readers.

In the second period of the first week, I close read Sonny's letter. This letter is placed right after the conversation between the narrator and the boy. However, months have passed between the conversation and the letter: "I didn't write Sonny or send him anything for a long time. When I finally did, it was just after my little girl died" (109). Although he may not have been conscious of doing so, he reaches out to Sonny because he needs some kind of human contact after the loss of his daughter. The insertion of Sonny's letter is an interesting authorial decision. For the

length of Sonny's letter, readers are released from the narrator's consciousness. We hear directly from Sonny: "You don't know how much I needed to hear from you. I wanted to write you many a time but I dug how much I must have hurt you and so I didn't write" (109). The main difference between the brothers is that Sonny is much more honest about his emotions. He says in the first sentence that he "needed" his brother. This, however, is not couched in accusatory language. Instead, even here, Sonny employs empathy. He writes that he understood how much he has hurt the narrator and that was the only reason why he did not initiate the correspondence. I help my students understand the linguistic cues to arrive at a better assessment of Sonny's character. I try to demonstrate that Sonny's emotional intelligence is reflected in the way he writes. In the final lines of the letter, Sonny mentions his brother's loss: "Give my love to Isabel and the kids and I was sure sorry to hear about little Gracie. I wish I could be like Mama and say the Lord's will be done, but I don't know it seems to me that trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped and I don't know what good it does to blame it on the Lord. But maybe it does some good if you believe it" (110). These are remarkable words on several levels. First, Sonny responds to his brother's emotional need promptly, without any grudge. Although his brother failed him during his time of need, Sonny does not let it stand between him and his brother. Second, Sonny intuits his brother's emotional need, a need that may have been unconscious to the narrator even as he wrote to Sonny. Finally, the rhetorical moves that Sonny makes are quite complex.⁴ Sonny says he wishes he could say "Lord's will be done." In this act, he both says it and does not say it. The reason why he cannot say it straightforwardly is because he knows from experience that those words often fail to console. He is worried that the words "Lord's will be done" would only draw a line between the mourner and the consoler. He therefore offers those words while acknowledging their inadequacy, thereby

conveying the full extent of his concern for his brother. After close reading this passage, I tell my students that it is not surprising that the narrator initially fails to give us a good view of this man. The brothers could not be more temperamentally different.

3. Harlem as Social Space

In the second week, I ask my students to examine Baldwin's description of Harlem. In "Sonny's Blues," the setting exerts a powerful influence on the characters. This influence is underscored by the narrator's habit of standing next to a window. His narration includes long excerpts that take in Harlem from different angles. This reflects Baldwin's deep understanding of the ghetto as social space.⁵⁾ To help my students grasp this idea, I make them read a few passages from Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. An excerpt I always include is the following:

Studies of juvenile delinquency and high school drop-out rates, for example, demonstrate that a child is better off in a good neighborhood and a troubled family than he or she is in a troubled neighborhood and a good family. We spend so much time celebrating the importance and power of family influence that it may seem, at first blush, that this can't be true. But in reality it is no more than an obvious and commonsensical extension of the Power of Context, because it says simply that children are powerfully shaped by their external environment, that the features of our immediate social and physical world—the streets we walk down, the people we encounter—play a huge role in shaping who we are and how we act. It isn't just serious criminal behavior, in the end, that is sensitive to environmental cues, it is all behavior. Weird as it sounds, if

you add up the meaning of the Stanford prison experiment and the New York subway experiment, they suggest that it is possible to be a better person on a clean street or in a clean subway than in one littered with trash and graffiti. (167-68)

Gladwell’s book is particularly useful in prompting students to share similar experiences and to imagine what it would feel like to live in the ghetto. Then I re-direct the students’ attention to passages that present Harlem and what the characters themselves say about the ghetto. After reading Gladwell, students begin to notice the smallest details of the setting and how these details infiltrate the narration.

The reunion of the brothers provides an occasion for a dense description of the setting. The narrator brings Sonny to his apartment in Harlem, and at that moment the readers are presented with the following:

We live in a housing project. It hasn’t been up long. A few days after it was up it seemed uninhabitably new, now, of course, it’s already rundown. It looks like a parody of the good, clean, faceless life—God knows the people who live in it do their best to make it a parody. The beat-looking grass lying around isn’t enough to make their lives green, the hedges will never hold out the streets, and they know it. The big windows fool no one, they aren’t big enough to make space out of no space. They don’t bother with the windows, they watch the TV screen instead. The playground is most popular with the children who don’t play at jacks, or skip rope, or roller skate, or swing, and they can be found in it after dark. We moved in partly because it’s not too far from where I teach, and partly for the kids; but it’s really just like the houses in which Sonny and I grew up. (113)

This passage captures how disorder spreads in the ghetto. It does not take long for the disorder of the neighborhood to enter the new building. As the narrator observes,

“the hedges will never hold out the streets.” Signs of disorder spread in the common areas such as the corridors and stairways. The playground becomes an especially dangerous place. It is where children will start using and selling drugs. The information provided at the end is especially useful in class. It reveals that the narrator is living in Harlem despite his higher social status. I ask my students why they think he is living in Harlem. My students come up with often implausible and sometimes comic explanations. This is the moment when I give a mini lecture on the ghetto as the physical manifestation of racism in the United States. I always find it useful to show a short video clip on redlining to underscore the deeply systematic nature of residential segregation.⁶⁾ A brief discussion of the history of heroin also helps my student understand Sonny’s troubles as a structural issue rather than an individual failing.

Another significant piece of information that surfaces at the end of the above passage is the presence of the narrator’s “kids.” At this point, one of the kids is dead. Grace’s death is not unrelated to the conditions of the ghetto; however, the remaining children are also crucially bound to the ghetto.⁷⁾ The kids, as it turns out, are two boys. This configuration is thematically meaningful in “Sonny’s Blues.” The narrator’s father had a brother, the narrator himself has one brother, and now he is the father of two sons. The short story is especially concerned about the influence of the ghetto on male children, and the narrator is acutely aware that the ghetto has not changed since his childhood. This means that his sons will inevitably be exposed to the same dangers and the same experiences that shaped Sonny, himself, and all the boys in Harlem. He moved to the new housing project “for the kids,” but he admits that the promise of safety is only superficial. The social dynamics that work through this residential structure are fundamentally the same as those that course through any other part of Harlem. The narrator’s reality is hardly removed from “their reality”

because he has not only a brother but also two sons living in Harlem.

Here I connect the issue of the physical setting back to what the class has discussed in the first week. If the narrator appeared to be too defensive in our earlier discussion, the new details that emerge in the midsection of the story allow us to start understanding his psychology. The key emotion in his psyche is fear, and that fear is linked to the history of racism in the United States and the suffering of generations of African Americans. A useful passage for examining this connection between Harlem and the psychology of its inhabitants is the following description of a typical Sunday evening during the narrator’s childhood:

And the living room would be full of church folks and relatives. There they sit, in chairs all around the living room, and the night is creeping up outside, but nobody knows it yet. You can see the darkness growing against the windowpanes and you hear the street noises every now and again, or maybe the jangling beat of a tambourine from one of the churches close by, but it’s real quiet in the room. For a moment nobody’s talking, but every face looks darkening, like the sky outside. And my mother rocks a little from the waist, and my father’s eyes are closed. Everybody is looking at something a child can’t see. For a minute they’ve forgotten the children. Maybe a kid is lying on the rug, half asleep. Maybe somebody’s got a kid in his lap and is absent-mindedly stroking the kid’s head. Maybe there’s a kid, quiet and big-eyed, curled up in a big chair in the corner. The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frightens the child obscurely. He hopes that the hand which strokes his forehead will never stop—will never die. He hopes that there will never come a time when the old folks won’t be sitting around the living room, talking about where they’ve come from, and what they’ve seen, and what’s happened to them and their kinfolk. (114-15)

This passage is precisely the kind of passage students tend to overlook. Nothing

much happens here. It is, in fact, a collection of many Sunday evenings drawn together. Yet in his subdued style, Baldwin embeds key information in the passage. The darkness that is growing outside and the “street noises” provide the backdrop for the darkness in the faces of the adults. This latter darkness arises from the topic of their conversation that is revealed at the end of the passage: “where they’ve come from, and what they’ve seen, and what’s happened to them and their kinfolk.” This could only add up to the lived experience of racism.⁸⁾ The “quiet and big-eyed” kid, probably the narrator as a child, absorbs this darkness even though he has not had any direct contact. The narrator states that the child is “frightened,” thereby revealing the origins of the fear that dominates his psychic economy. This passage reveals that the narrator, far from being callous, is actually the opposite. He is a highly sensitive person who is receptive of all kinds of environmental cues—psychological, social, and physical. The narrator’s fear develops due to his extreme sensitivity.⁹⁾

4. Bebop and Freedom

I reserve discussions of the plot until the final week because students need to finish the story to start exploring how the author chooses to sequence and pace the events. “Sonny’s Blues” has an intricate plot structure. There are multiple flashbacks and even a flashback within a flashback. I hand out a worksheet that lists all the events in the order in which they appear in the story and ask the students to rearrange them in the chronological order. This exercise takes an entire class period as students struggle with the complex temporality of the story. The objective of the exercise is twofold. It forces the students to sort out the events on their own. Then we work together to check the correct order, which allows me to straighten out any confusion

and preempt unfortunate misinterpretations that arise from an inadequate understanding of the plot. I draw the flow of events on the board, which visualizes the "pull of the past" that works throughout the text. Racism has a long history in the United States, and Baldwin manages to evoke that long history via plot structure. For example, it is revealed in the middle of the story that the narrator's uncle was deliberately run over by white men as a joke. The description of the incident reveals that it took place in "a rural area in some unidentified southern state" (Harris 103). As insignificant as this detail may seem, it allows Baldwin to incorporate the history of the Great Migration into the story. The narrator's father was one of the millions that migrated from the South to the North during the first half of the twentieth century. They fled Jim Crow South, only to find themselves trapped in the northern ghettos. Another feature of the plot that becomes glaringly visible through this exercise is Baldwin's tendency to breeze past major events such as the passing of the narrator's parents or the death of the narrator's daughter. Instead of focusing on such obviously dramatic events, Baldwin chooses to zoom in on the setting sun, the narrator's subway ride to work, or the brothers' cab ride home, to mention a few examples. "Sonny's Blues" is possibly the novice student's nightmare, yet it is the perfect text for showing how sophisticated uses of the plot involve more than just telling what happened. This, I believe, is one of the most important lessons that need to be taught in introductory college literature courses.

The final class meeting is devoted to a discussion of the story's climax. Sonny invites his brother to a jam session at which he will be playing the piano. By seeing Sonny interact with his fellow musicians and hearing him initially struggle then eventually succeed in improvisation, the narrator finally begins to appreciate Sonny's vocation. Because the narrator's epiphany is synched with Sonny's music, it is particularly important to discuss the kind of music that Sonny plays in the club.

Critics have been slow to discuss the specificities of the music described in this culminating scene. Only in the nineties do critics begin to take serious account of the obvious fact that Sonny is a bebopper. Pancho Savery and Tracey Sherard underscore that what Sonny plays in this scene is bebop despite the story's title (Sherard 691) and despite the fact that Sonny's performance is labeled "Sonny's blues" (Savery 166). Why then use the term in the title as well as the text of the story? To understand this, one needs some background information in the history of jazz. Whenever a certain style of jazz was appropriated by the music industry, a younger generation of jazz musicians emerged to reestablish the hegemony of improvisation. This came as a stylistic break or turn away from existing procedures. This renewed emphasis on improvisation was often understood as a return to the aesthetics of the blues. It is with this blues continuum in mind that Baldwin dubs Sonny's performance "Sonny's blues." The improvisatory nature of bebop also explains why Sonny, who has been at the piano since his teens, experiences trouble during the performance. The narrator observes, "He and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped; started another way, panicked, marked time, started again; then seemed to have found a direction, panicked again, got stuck. And the face I saw on Sonny I'd never seen before" (138). This passage speaks volumes about the art of improvisation. Clearly, not anything goes. Because Sonny has been out of practice and he is unsure about himself, the audience is subject to the awful experience of watching him flounder on stage. This disposes the narrator toward greater openness. He sees Sonny "working" on the piano for the first time, and the experience changes his perception of jazz.

The more familiar a reader is with the history of jazz, the greater will her appreciation of Baldwin's portrayal of the jam session be. Yet I hesitate to spend too much time in class giving a lecture on bebop. Since the course I teach is

“Introduction to English Literature” and not “History of Jazz” or even “Twentieth Century African American Literature,” time is limited. When I reach this point in the course, I prefer to depend on my students’ musical sensibility. I start the final session by playing some music by Charlie Parker, Sonny’s idol. “Now’s the Time” is a good choice, a piece that has retained its appeal despite the temporal distance between then and now. I ask my students to describe the characteristics of the music they hear and write down their observations. Then I fill in any details that they missed and give a brief lecture on bebop as a stylistic turn away from swing.¹⁰ After this exercise, I close read the passage where Baldwin describes the music:

The dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums, Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted, sweet and high, slightly detached perhaps, and Creole listened, commenting now and then, dry, and driving, beautiful and calm and old. Then they all came together again, and Sonny was part of the family again. I could tell this from his face. He seemed to have found, right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano. It seemed that he couldn’t get over it. (139)

A more accurate verbal rendition of bebop is difficult to imagine. Jazz musicians are, of course, notorious for claiming to “speak” with their instruments.¹¹ Baldwin takes this idea and presents the performance as a conversation between the musicians. This, however, is done without losing sight of the fact that musical instruments are involved; the adjectives reflect the characteristics of each instrument. The drums make an “awful” sound, the horn is “sweet and high,” and the base (played by Creole) is “dry” and “driving.” But the highlight of the passage is Baldwin’s description of Sonny’s performance. When Baldwin writes “It seemed that he couldn’t get over it,” one can almost hear the tinkling of the piano as Sonny’s

fingers dance in accordance with the fast pace and rapid chord changes that characterize bebop.

I spend the last period on “Sonny’s Blues” exploring the qualities of this music because it ultimately helps my students understand why Sonny makes the kind of choices he makes and how the brothers re-establish their bond. There are other turning points in the story that merit in-class discussion such as the description of the street revivalists or the conversation between the brothers that ensues. However, time constraints almost always force me to choose one scene, and delivering a rudimentary knowledge of bebop is too important a pedagogical task to bypass. As the narrator witnesses Sonny’s struggles on the stage, he comes to realize the broader cultural significance of bebop. He understands, for the first time, that Sonny’s performance is a critical response to racism. As Nathaniel Mackey points out, black music “is notoriously a critique of social reality, a critique of social arrangements in which, because of racism, one finds oneself deprived of community and kinship” (*Discrepant* 234). Because of this critical force embedded in this musical tradition, Sonny’s performance temporarily releases the narrator from the fear that has been gripping him throughout the story. Baldwin’s portrayal of this impact aligns perfectly with Mackey’s analysis of black music:

Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn’t hurried and it was 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. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. (140)

The lament of the original tune is transformed through Sonny’s stylistic innovation into a liberating force. Sonny’s rendition of a preexisting melody thus points to “how we could cease lamenting,” how African Americans can overcome the legacy of slavery and institutional racism. The narrator senses freedom lurking around—freedom from the pain and fear that has weighed him down since his childhood. Despite the narrator’s best efforts—serving in the army, getting a respectable job, and moving into a new housing project—he has hardly escaped from the reality of the ghetto and lives in constant fear of the many disasters that could befall him and his loved ones. The way to freedom, ironically, had been near him all along; what he needed to do was to learn to listen.

5. Conclusion

One of the delights of teaching “Sonny’s Blues” is that “students must learn the same lesson as the narrator: they must learn to listen” (Wilner 190). By devoting three weeks to analyzing the narrator, my students make the epistemological journey with him from defensiveness to greater openness. The cultural barrier between my students and the world of “Sonny’s Blues” is high. College students studying literature in the Republic of Korea are far removed from the urban crisis in the United States. Yet teaching my students to pay attention to the point of view, the setting, and the plot of “Sonny’s Blues” helps them gain a better understanding of a particular social formation. Strange as it sounds, this kind of attention (that of foreigners learning to analyze literature) is precisely the kind of attention Baldwin hoped to spark when crafting a story so dense and structured out of the material that was for him so familiar and so close to heart.

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I am grateful to the students in the courses “Reading Anglo-American Culture” I taught at Seoul National University in spring 2011 and “Introduction to English Literature” I taught at Inha University between 2011 and 2017. Their willingness to engage with this difficult story pushed me to ever greater pedagogical inventiveness.

Notes

- 1) In 1994, the ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner published a massive study entitled *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* to redress this stereotype about improvisation. One of the musicians he interviews, Wynton Marsalis, comments, “Jazz is not just, ‘Well, man, this is what I feel like playing.’ It’s a very structured thing” (63).
- 2) This is not to deny that Baldwin identifies his writing with the art of the singers of the blues. He does. But his understanding of the blues is clearly different from the one presented by Reilly. In addition, Baldwin has expressed his distaste of literature that “copies, rather than exploits, the cadences of the blues” (*Collected Essays* 615).
- 3) I am not, however, implying that my students do not know about racism in the United States. They encounter a plethora of images by consuming American film and television. As a result, they often harbor racist stereotypes. Teaching “Sonny’s Blues” in Korea is, therefore, pedagogically meaningful on multiple planes.
- 4) One of the stereotypes of jazz musicians is that they express themselves through music only. For a relevant discussion of a jazz pianist’s interest in expressing himself in language and not only in sounds, see Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Literary Ellington.”
- 5) For a fuller discussion of this aspect of the story, see my previous publication titled “The Sociology of the Ghetto in James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues.’”
- 6) The clip is from the third episode of the documentary *Race: The Power of Illusion*.
- 7) Grace dies of polio. Infant mortality rate was much higher in the ghetto.
- 8) The imagery of light and darkness has been subjected to much critical discussion. An exemplary discussion is Michael Clark’s “James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’: Childhood, Light, and Art.” One crucial way in which I diverge from Clark’s discussion is the emphasis I place on the social nature of the imagery of light and darkness in “Sonny’s Blues.”
- 9) In the first week, I frame the narrator’s defensiveness as a flaw for pedagogical purposes. However, I tend to agree with Arlene Wilner’s formulation that the narrator evinces “an unintentionally but profoundly destructive self-righteousness to which everyone is

vulnerable” (189). One needs to balance one’s assessment of his character with a certain generosity of spirit. I thus complicate my original framing in the second week of class.

- 10) For a broader ethnomusicologist treatment of bebop, see Chapter Five in Guthrie P. Ramsey’s *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*.
- 11) This notion has a concrete basis. Bebop musicians took inspiration for musical phrasing and rhythm from human speech.

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국문초록

꼼꼼히 읽기와 문화적 특수성: 영문학개론 강의에서 「소니의 블루스」 활용하기

김 의 영 (인하대)

본 논문은 영문학개론 강의에서 제임스 볼드윈의 「소니의 블루스」를 활용한 경험을 정리한다. 한국에서 영문학을 전공하는 대학생들에게 「소니의 블루스」에 나타난 미국의 계토와 인종차별의 현실은 생소할 수밖에 없다. 그러나 영문학개론 강의에서는 바로 이 부분이 오히려 기회로 작용하기도 한다. 문학의 여러 개념을 소개하고 익히는 수업인 영문학개론이기에 1주차는 시점, 2주차는 배경, 3주차는 플롯을 집중적으로 다룬다. 수업활동과 토론 그리고 강의를 통해 꼼꼼히 읽기를 수행하는데, 이 과정을 통해 학생들은 작품에 나타난 문화적 특수성에 주목하게 된다. 시점을 다루는 주차에는 서술자의 결함에 대해 살펴본다. 서술자의 성격적 결함은 곧바로 서술자로서의 부족함으로 이어진다. 마약혐의로 감옥에 가게 된 동생에 대해 냉담한 태도를 보이는 서술자는 급기야 독자의 소니에 대한 접근마저 가로막기 때문이다. 2주차에는 저자가 할렘 사회적 공간으로 그리는 점에 주목한다. 수강생들이 배경의 중요성을 인식하게 되면, 이를 다시 서술자와 연관해서 살펴보는 시간을 갖는다. 계토에 대한 이해를 기반으로 서술자의 정신세계를 지배하는 정서인 공포의 근원에 대해서 논의할 수 있기 때문이다. 마지막 주차에는 인종차별에 대한 저항으로서의 비밥을 살펴본다. 두 형제의 갈등이 해소되는 소니의 연주 장면에서 서술자는 재즈의 사회적 기능에 대해 이해하게 되고, 평생 자신이 사로잡혀 지냈던 공포에서 벗어나는 법을 배우게 된다. 결론적으로 본 논문은 작품의 세세한 디테일에 대한 관심이야말로 「소니의 블루스」의 문화적 특수성을 이해하는 접근법임을 피력한다.

주제어: 제임스 볼드윈, 「소니의 블루스」, 꼼꼼히 읽기, 할렘, 비밥

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이름: 김의영 (부교수)

소속: 인하대학교

이메일: eykim@inha.ac.kr

