



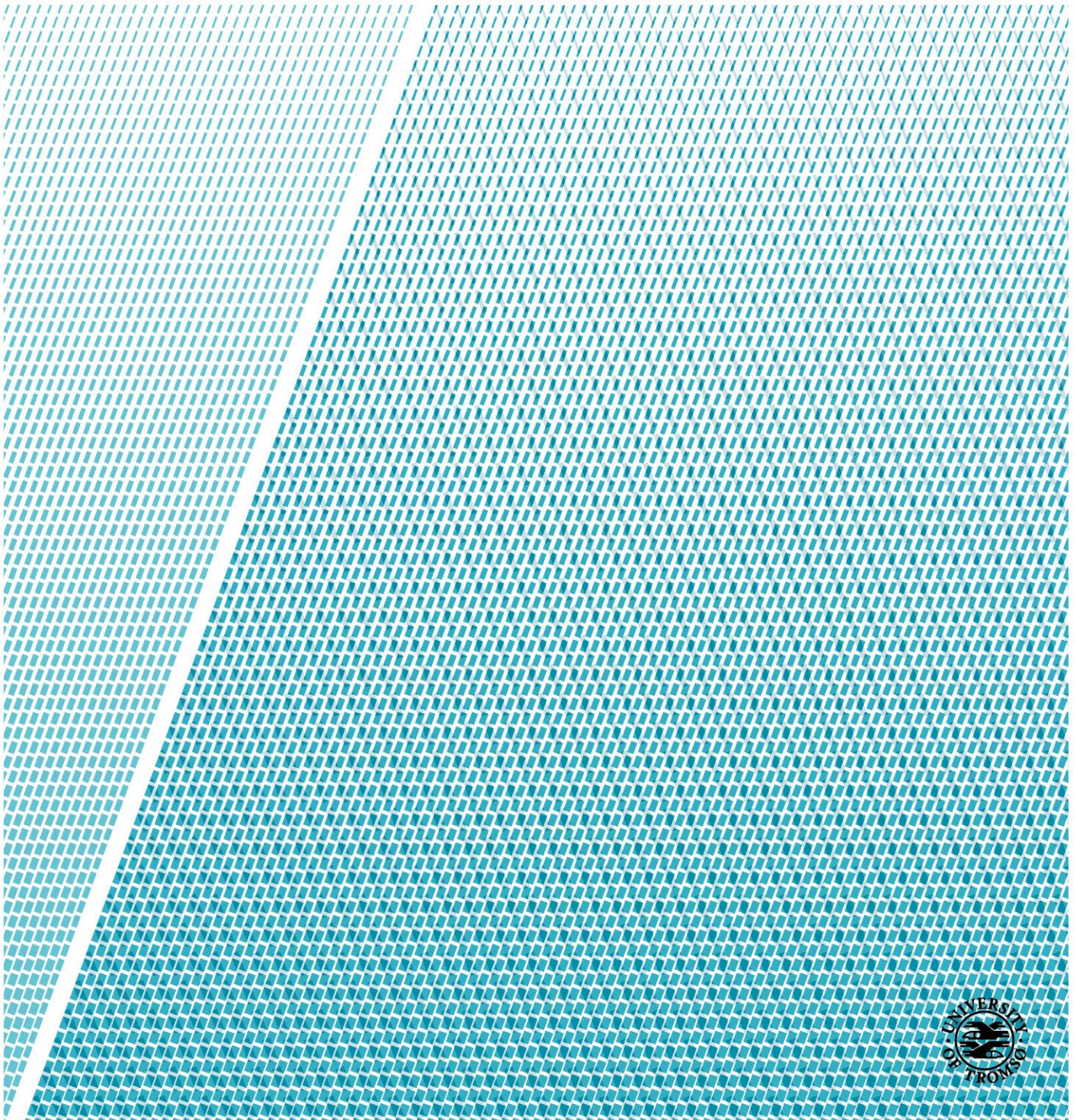
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# An Investigation of Empathy in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

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## Abstract

This master's thesis aims to look at how empathy is thematized in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." To do this, the thesis will start by introducing affect theory. Affect aims to put emotions back into the study of literature. Emotions become even more important because of the notion of empathy. Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself in somebody else's shoes. Baldwin's short story invites empathetic responses in its readers, by using narrative techniques such as first-person narration, symbolism and thematizing empathy in the text through topics such as poverty, drug addiction, music as a language of its own and silences. The readers are urged to undergo the same change as the narrator, as he transitions from feeling pity for those who are less fortunate, to having empathetic responses towards his brother and people similar to him. Baldwin's writing constitutes an effort to make readers able to identify with people who are outcasts in society.



## Preface

Setting off to write a thesis about literature, I had to ask myself: why do we read literature? Do we do it purely for fun, to escape reality, to learn, be inspired or to feel something? Maybe we read literature to learn about other people, to dive into their reality, in a pursuit to understand them better. If we read a sad story, we react by feeling sad, maybe it even makes us cry. Other stories might make us laugh, feel angry, or shocked. However, what does it matter, having an emotional response to a novel or short story? What is that emotional response good for? Does it lead to anything but self-gratification? Alternatively, does it lead people to turn their heads away from the books and to the faces of people around them? Do they see the sad stories in the faces of real-life people? More importantly, do they act to help those people, to make a change in the real world? Likewise, why do people write literature? Do authors write to cause reactions in their readers? If they do, what reactions do they want? Do they want the reader to feel empathy with their characters? What if authors use empathy as a tool in their work, purely to evoke feelings in the readers? What if they use empathy as a device to gain readers, and not to affect the world in any way that would cause change? What if money is what drives an author to write? If so, why are we still moved to tears, laughter and anger by literature? In our own present, with films, TV and social media, why are we still reading and writing books? Is there a difference between fiction today versus fiction written in, for example, the 1800's? Could I not write a thesis about empathy and the reader even if it is hard to measure, difficult to define and even harder to prove has any effect for change in the world?

The journey to write this thesis has been long, or perhaps just a little bit longer than intended. Life tends to throw you curve balls that in some way or another always tend to lead you where you inevitably were meant to go. Therefore, thank you Marius, for distracting me. For the beginning of my journey, Laura Castor needs a special thanks for giving moral support and mindful life lessons. For the ending of my journey, Justin Parks needs a huge thank you for telling it to me straight. Your words clarified many hurdles and I will remember to always greet you if I see you in the grocery shop.



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# 1 Introduction

Setting out to write a master's thesis, I could not help but wondering: how did I end up here, writing a thesis about literature? What makes literature so important? After reading countless works of fiction that moved me to tears, made me smile or forced me to contemplate *why*, I was left feeling like that was exactly why: reading literature evokes feelings in the reader. Why else do we spend so much time and energy reading, writing, theorising and studying literature? What is it that makes literature so important? By asking these questions, I heard myself sounding exactly like my sixteen year of pupils, who year after year express their disappointment when they have to read works of literature in their English courses. *Why do we have to read literature!?* As a teacher, my job is to make them understand *why*, which is equally as difficult for me, as for them. Thus, part of this investigation is to find reasons that will help me give my students their answer, and perhaps make them see the value of literature and what it might teach them.

One could argue that what makes literature so important is that it unites people. It builds bridges between people and stories that would not have met otherwise. Hence, what makes literature important is the feeling it produces in the reader. The next logical question is, then, why are the reader's feelings important? One could argue that the reader's feelings are important because emotional reactions to literature may cause people to react differently to the world around them. This empathetic feeling, or a feeling for a character or a narrative, is what can make literature pragmatic in a social context. If literature is to make sense, it must have a purpose beyond entertaining the reader. Somehow, it must build those bridges or cause that empathetic feeling that might result in someone caring about the condition of someone else that they might not have cared about otherwise. James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" is a short story that begs its readers to feel empathy with its characters, the same way as Sonny begs his brother to feel empathy with him. The characters in "Sonny's Blues" are inspired by real people in real situations. Therefore, the short story can build bridges between the reader and people of Harlem, or others who share the same fate as outcasts of society, or who live in poverty.

To investigate the topic of empathy in literature, we must look back to a time when literature had a commonly understood purpose in society. Mary-Catherine Harrison (262) argues that Victorian literature is especially suited to use in a study of empathy, because literature at that time had a commonly understood purpose in society. It was believed that

people who read about the struggles of others would be moved into action to help them. In our time, with social media on smartphones and tablets, as well as TVs and newspapers, we have easy access to people's lives, and subsequently their suffering. In the Victorian times, these inputs were narrowed to literature and print. Harrison states that in the Victorian era, "Social problem literature, in particular, was predicated on the assumption that readerly emotion would lead to ethical behavior" (262). Literature that focused on poverty was believed to give the reader a more empathetic attitude towards the poor, and as a result lead them to help the poor to end their suffering. The effect of narrative empathy has since then been studied, dismissed and revived in many fields. For instance, Suzanne Keen stresses that there is too much left to learn and understand about narrative empathy "before we place the novel in a service to social goals, no matter how laudable they appear" (xv). Despite this, this thesis wishes to investigate empathy in literature, specifically, how empathy is thematised and activated by James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues." If authors today do not write to change people's attitudes towards others, what, then, is their aim? In addition, what does a narrative have to contain to be suitable for an investigation of empathy? Are the reader's attitude and the suffering of people today so different from those of the nineteenth century that empathy no longer has an important role?

In the introduction to *The History of English Literature*, Michael Alexander argues that what defines a written text as literature "lies in its combination of literary art and human interest. A work of high art which lacks human interest dies" (3). This definition speaks of human interest as a human's capability to be interested in something. That is, it must be interesting in some way for people to care for it. Alexander argues that humans are interested in change, which leads him to do a discussion about language, literature and historical eras. What if a piece of writing was not considered literature unless it had an interest, a curiosity or concern, for the human condition? It is not easy speaking about one generalisable human condition, even if you can find common denominators such as poverty, hunger, loss and sorrow or inequality. To complicate the matter even more, it is difficult to say that all human beings are interested in the life condition of all people. Hence, the notion of empathy seems to be reliant on who is experiencing it and towards whom. As this thesis will mention later, people tend to care more about people within their social group than those who are considered outside that group. It might be difficult to find a common ground for human interest. This thesis is based on the presumption that we all have a common interest in each other and each other's wellbeing, even if this might be a notion that is typically gendered: "I observe that

women writers and novelists from around the world endorse the notion of shared human emotions when they overtly call upon their readers' empathy" (Keen viii). Perhaps it is difficult to find a single human condition that will evoke emotion in all readers. However, some topics could be universal in some sense, for example poverty. Poverty may take on many faces, in many different cultures and countries. However, the notion of not having enough money to feed yourself and your family is the same. Therefore, it could be argued that this human condition would be understood by people despite race, ethnicity or cultural background. James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" depicts the lives of African Americans living in Harlem, New York. His short story focuses on two brothers who lived completely different lives, despite being brought up in the same household, presumably with the same possibilities, or rather, lack of possibilities. The life conditions of Harlem are described as a vicious circle of poverty, drugs and a lack of possibilities to get away from this circle. Baldwin also narrows in on the personal experiences of the two brothers, and their relationship. Here, the struggles the two brothers experience could be universal in the sense that they are not bound to place or time.

This thesis will investigate how empathy is thematised in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." In addition, the thesis will argue that empathy is not only a major theme in Baldwin's text, but that the text produces empathetic responses in the reader. Baldwin's short story is especially suited for such an investigation because it invites an empathetic response in the reader. The short story reflects the conditions of people in Harlem, specifically the lives of the two brothers. It gives the reader an insight to the many aspects of being brought up in Harlem. "Sonny's Blues" particularly focuses on topics such as drugs, poverty and music. The personal relationship between the brothers is also an important part of the narrative. All these elements give the reader a broader understanding of both the inequalities in America, poverty, drug abuse and how people react to them. Even if the short story is set in the fifties, it is relevant today because the social and economic differences between African American communities and white American ones are still high.

To do this investigation, this thesis will take a closer look at how narrative techniques can be used to create emotional reactions in the reader, as well as taking a closer look at sections in the text that call for empathetic feelings in the reader. This thesis will also use Baldwin's essay "Notes of a Native Son" to illuminate elements of "Sonny's Blues." "Notes of a Native Son" is a personal essay, part of his essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*, where Baldwin describes his upbringing and relationship with his father and how he experienced

living as a black man in America. “Notes of a Native Son” will be used to demonstrate similarities between the essay and “Sonny’s Blues”, in particular the similarities between the characters in the two narratives. This comparison is interesting because of the autobiographical nature of Baldwin’s essay, compared to his fiction. Reading “Sonny’s Blues” as a work of fiction, may produce empathy in the reader, but perhaps reading “Notes of a Native Son” will help readers relate the fictitious characters to real life people and events. In Baldwin’s essays the reader is presented with a more personal rendition of growing up as an African American in the mid-1900s. “Sonny’s Blues” is a fictional narrative about real life situations and sufferings, situated within the same timeline and place as Baldwin’s essay. The two narratives will be discussed when there are similarities between them that could function to give readers a broader understanding of Sonny, Baldwin or living life in America as an African American. This thesis wishes to argue that it might be helpful for the reader to link the fictional characters to real life event and people, in order to feel empathy for people living in the same conditions as the characters.

## 2 Theory

### 2.1 Affect study

When studying feelings in literature and its readers, one field of literary inquiry that seems impossible to ignore is affect theory. Affect theory places emotions back on the map of literary studies. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, editors of the *Affect Theory Reader*, state:

There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be. If anything, it is more tempting to imagine that there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds. (Gregg and Seigworth 3-4)

Gregg and Seigworth are content that there are no generalisable theories of affect, because affect has to do with emotions, not theory as such. Theories about literature usually denote that there is a certain way of analysing literature, and often this has ignored the reader's emotion. In dealing with affect, limiting formulas concerning ways of doing things remove the emotion from the reader. Therefore, "a great many theories of affect do not sweat the construction of any elaborate step-by-step methodology much at all, but rather come to fret the presentation or the style of presentation, the style of being present, more than anything else" (Gregg and Seigworth 14). In other words, affect theory does not focus on a method for studying literature. This might be because it is difficult to follow a step-by-step guide and at the same time let yourself be emotionally driven by what you are reading. As mentioned above, emotions and strict rules for reading literature do not go hand in hand. This leads us into the topic of reader response, which will be discussed later.

Another writer on affect theory is Jean-François Vernay. In *The Seduction of Fiction*, Vernay expresses a wish to revive the value of literature. He observes that reading literature today is only focused on critique, and not on a "reflection on the human condition, on the individual and society, on love and hate, joy and despair" (Vernay xxi). He argues that this has resulted in a reduction in students who sign up for literary courses. This is because today's way of teaching literature does not create a love of literature in students or lead them to become readers of literature. Vernay argues that a focus on human emotion would shift the focus towards why reading is interesting and how teachers could make it interesting for

students. That is, an increased focus on emotion would make literature more interesting to contemporary readers. This thesis will not look further into the topic of teaching literature. However, Vernay's idea is an interesting one. A change in how we teach literature could open up for more people wanting to attend literary courses.

Even if Vernay's arguments are directed towards professional readers, he also argues that the way literature is taught in schools should reflect the changes we can see in society today. In 2010, the French Ministry of Education "acknowledged the crucial role emotions play when reading fiction" (Vernay ix). Emotions are crucial, not only in our day to day lives, but as part of our education system. The argument is that both human logic and emotion should play equal roles in interpreting literature, because this would reflect society today. Vernay argues that today, emotions have taken a huge part in our everyday life. He goes as far as saying "society is swamped by a cult-like worship of the emotions" (Vernay xxii). Even if this statement has a negative connotation, the change is positive. If literature can make people more empathetic towards others, surely a society focused on emotions is a positive thing. To follow the trends in society, literary studies should consider the changed view on emotional responses, as equally as important as our logical sense. "The cognitive science approach reminds us of the mechanical nature of the human brain and encourages us to recognize the contribution of the emotions to the intellectual process at the heart of the discipline of literature" (Vernay xxiii). In other words, the human brain is divided into two parts. One of the parts is connected to a logical sense, and the other, to an emotional and creative one. Logical sense is often considered better than the emotional and creative, and as a result, human beings sought to make decisions based on logical thinking, rather than following their hearts. What Vernay suggests is that the two parts should be considered as equal. As a result, emotions would be considered equally as important as people's logical sense.

The difference between professional and non-professional readers is that the professional reader, according to Vernay (2), is forced to read, and is subjected to rules about how to read. The non-professionals do not read according to such rules. The latter, he argues, often tend to see the film and not read the book, or they read to pass time or when they are alone, as entertainment. The professional reader will not be distracted by other media, as they will set time aside for reading. The main difference between the two is that the professional reader, under pressure or not, will be able to ask questions about the text on another level than the non-professional one. "The professional reader, even if forced to read at a more demanding level, retains some flexibility in unravelling the text, such as questioning the text further in order to explore the range of effects" (Vernay 2). With this, he implies that the

professional reader is the one who can dig deeper into the text, to reveal its many levels of meaning. Like Vernay, Suzanne Keen devotes a paragraph or two to non-professional readers. She calls them *middlebrow readers*, those who read mass-market books, attend books clubs and rely on their emotional connections to the characters in reviewing a book. “Empathy shapes their recommendations and judgements about fiction” (ix). The main difference between the non-professional and the professional reader according to Keen is that the non-professional reader will not use academic language in their analysis. Instead, they rely on whether they can identify with the characters. Unarguably, there are more non-professional readers. Their opinions about books that do or do not belong to the canon should therefore also be admitted into the discussion about empathy and reading.

## 2.2 From Sympathy to Einfühlung

Before we move on to the heart of this thesis, the terms used in this paper must be explained and distinguished from one another. The terms *sympathy* and *empathy* are both used, and distinguished from one another, in everyday speech. To explain the differences between the two, a short description of the history of the two words will be provided. The term *sympathy* was widely used in seventeenth-century Britain and was translated to *feeling with or fellow feeling* (Jahoda 153). At that time, the word was used in medical science to indicate two things in relation to each other, as well as “the psychological meaning of sharing the feelings of another person or being affected by their suffering” (Jahoda 152). In this definition, the act of feeling for another person, or being affected by their suffering, takes on a mimicking nature. That is, sympathy occurs when a person mimics these feelings of another person. The word “empathy” started its career in Germany as the word *einfühlung*. In the late nineteenth century, a German philosophy student by the name of Robert Vischer wrote his dissertation on “Einfühlung, literally ‘feeling oneself into’” (Jahoda 153). The term was used in relation to art, and how you appreciate the beauty of art: “It is reasonable to describe the process of aesthetic appreciation conceived by Vischer as the projection of the self into the object of beauty” (Jahoda 154). His dissertation was part of a countermovement to the abstract formalist movement, including the work of Robert Zimmermann, who “sought to develop a ‘science of forms’ based on mathematical relationships underlying surface irregularities, which made for aesthetic appeal” (Jahoda 153). The countermovement was part of late Romanticism and thought that the formalist approach to the appreciation of art left it

cold and without feeling. Instead, adherents of this approach wanted to focus on the content of art: symbolism and emotion.

After Vischer, a psychologist by the name of Theodor Lipps wrote much about the now popular term *emföhlung*. Using the Freudian term *ego*, he defines it as follows: “*Emföhlung* is the fact described here that the object is ego and thereby the ego object. It is the fact that the contrast between myself and the object disappears” (Jahoda 154-155). Lipps divided the term into two parts: one was based on instinct and the other on imitation. As Lipps describes it, instinct is a reaction that is not reflected upon: “The (mental) activity of creating a facial expression or gesture constitutes an immediate conscious experience, unmediated by any reflection—it is instinctive” (Jahoda 156). Hence, in relation to emotions and experiencing someone else’s pain, it is based on a previous experience in ourselves. That is, because we know that a facial expression like the one associated with anger, is linked with anger, we will experience anger if we see the same facial expression in someone else. Lipps (cited in Jahoda 156-7) argues that this imitation and instinct go hand in hand in the term *emföhlung*. The instinct is what happens inside us when we see others’ facial expressions, which is different from pure imitation because imitation has no such affect. Imitation can be best explained by yawning. Yawning is infectious: if we see someone yawn, an automatic imitation occurs, and we yawn as well. However, there are no inner reactions in this activity.

In the early twentieth century, Edward Titchener, another psychologist, would translate the German term into English. Even if it is said that he misinterpreted Lipps’s term *emföhlung*, his use of the word became important in differentiating between *empathy* and *sympathy*. One of Edward Titchener’s definitions was as follows: “Empathy (a word formed on the analogy of sympathy) is the name given to the process of humanising objects, of reading or feeling ourselves into them” (Titchener, 1910, 417, qtd. in Jahoda 162). Even today, the difference between the two terms seems difficult to explain, even if we use the terms differently in everyday speech. Jahoda argues that the only way we could determine a real difference between the two terms would be to do neuropsychological testing to see these emotions represented in the brain. If we use Lipps’ argument about imitation and instinct, sympathy occurs when thinking about the emotions caused by a facial expression or gesture, instead of actually having an emotional reaction to that gesture. As will be explained later, sympathy takes on the same role as pity, because taking in someone’s possible emotional reaction is not the same as understanding their reaction, as with empathy.



## 2.3 Empathy

First, we should establish a definition of what empathy really is. The term is widely used in science, as well as everyday speech, and several scholars have attempted a definition (Hammond and Kim 7). Empathy, according to Nancy Eisenberg, is an “affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, and which is identical or very similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel” (cited in Keen 173). In other words, empathy is an emotional response to another’s emotional state or condition that stems from the understanding of that person’s emotional state or condition. Alternatively, you could say that it is the ability to imagine yourself in another person’s position. To be able to imagine oneself in another person’s position, one must be able to identify with that person. As a result, it is commonly believed that one will become more kind to that person. We can understand this by thinking about whom we would empathise with if we had to choose between a person we know and a stranger. People would most likely feel more empathy toward someone they know, because they know their story and understand them. This is what literature can do for people, as it can teach its readers about other people and their stories. As a result, it is believed that they would feel empathy with the characters, and with people resembling those characters in real life. Since literature can teach people to be more kind to others, one could argue that reading literature has an altruistic effect. Altruism is an ethical theory based on people giving of themselves for the good or betterment of society (Keen vii). The conclusion that reading literature has an altruistic effect is a popular one. As we will see later, this altruistic affect might be temporary, and is very difficult to study.

Thus, the theory is that reading improves empathy in readers, which ultimately will make them better citizens. Suzanne Keen (vii) is sceptical of this conclusion, because there are too many variables that make a scientific study of this almost impossible. She argues that such variables could be gender, race, age, generation, or the kind of literature used in the study. Canonical and culturally valued literature has long been believed to have positive effects on its reader. Therefore, Keen asks, what makes canonical works different from mass-market literature? In her scepticism, she argues that if reading literature and empathetic narrative techniques have an altruistic effect, these should be further studied for the benefit of society.

If empathetic reading experiences start a chain reaction leading to mature sympathy and altruistic behaviour, as many believe, then discovering the narrative techniques involved matters, for it turns out in laboratory experiments that we humans, like other primates, tend to experience empathy most readily and accurately for those who seem like us. (Keen x)

Discovering such narrative techniques matters because people tend to care more about people within their own group, rather than those who are not considered part of their group.

Therefore, empathetic readings that have altruistic effects on the readers should make people understand each other despite race, gender and generations, possibly limiting real differences between people and therefore opening for people wanting to help each other. Understanding empathy and reading, and the possible real-life effects, is important. Keen does not argue against the fact that readers feel empathy with fictional characters. However, she finds “the case for altruism stemming from novel reading inconclusive at best and nearly always exaggerated in favour of the beneficial effects of novel reading” (vii). As we shall see later, studies have shown that reading fiction improves empathy, even if the improvement is temporary. Studying empathy in the reader is difficult, and it seems problematic to show any long-term results. It is also difficult to conclude what the impact in the reader is, because of many variables that can affect the results. Such variables may be gender, ethnicity, education, or individual differences in people. For example, a person reading “Sonny’s Blues” could be moved into action to help African Americans living in poverty, but it is hard to say if the reader’s behaviour is because of having read the narrative, or if the reader is otherwise affected by personal opinions, political engagement or for how long any such reaction would last.

Even if reading literature has been considered a beneficial activity, both for personal growth and improving one’s consideration for others, some argue that this conclusion is overrated. As already mentioned, Suzanne Keen is sceptical of how much of an altruistic effect reading has, or if it does, how to prove it in a scientific manner. In addition to this, Anna Lindhé argues that reading does not necessarily give readers a template of how we should live our lives or show us how to change our personalities. Rather, it gives the reader a view on how we live our lives. “Perhaps literature is at its most ethical not when it appeals to our empathy and compassion but when it bears witness to—and confronts us with—this paradox of human life” (Lindhé 38). Instead of relying on stories urging people to do good for others, it shows the reader that in reality we do not. If reading literature causes the amount of

empathy it is popularly believed to do, there should be more evidence of this. According to Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim, several scholars have criticised empathy, because the term is used with the same structures as the term sympathy. Through sympathy you can distance yourself from another by pitying instead of actually feeling for someone. “The widespread, and sometimes reductive, view of ‘sympathy’ equates it with objectifying pity, which has led to critiques of sympathy as a tool of domination” (Hammond and Kim 9). That way, the term sympathy is often not as highly regarded as the term empathy, because it denotes negativity. The same critique has been led against empathy because the term is used the same way. “Empowered members of the nation thus distance themselves from the poor and marginal” (Hammond and Kim 9). Hammond and Kim (11) argue that empathy also can be negative, and the popular belief that it has positive effects on the reader as well as society could even be harmful. As well as many other critics and scholars, Hammond and Kim do not discard the effects reading can have on a reader or society, but they argue that it should be studied more. This is because of the complex relationship “between reading, literature, empathy, morality, and society” (Hammond and Kim 11). Maja Djikic and Keith Oatley argue that evidence shows that reading literature can change a person’s personality. “The art of fiction is a social influence, but one that helps people to understand and feel, and even change their selfhood, in their own way” (Djikic and Oatley 498). That way, it is not the author who persuades readers to change their minds and teaches them to feel for and understand people better. Instead, it happens through indirect communication (498). Each reader can change their personality, much like we do when we are influenced by people around us. Changes in personality can improve people’s ability to emphasise with others. This way, literature takes a role as a member of society, with abilities contributing to influence the people around it. In other words, people learn through being in a relationship with other people. Getting to know new people will expand their horizons further. Thus, literature has the same ability to teach people about others that they might not otherwise have encountered or established a relationship with.

Over the years, the study of empathy has taken a back seat across the academic fields. However, recently researchers in fields like neuroscience, psychology and social science have become more interested in studying empathy. Suzanne Keen argues for neuroscience in relation to empathy, because neuroscience has made it possible to measure reactions in the brain related to empathy. “Neuroscientists have already declared that people scoring high on empathy tests have especially busy mirror neuron systems in their brains” (Keen viii). Vernay

also looks towards neuroscience in his book. He states, “studying literature is a means to cultivate one’s tastes, to shape one’s sensitivity, to guide one’s love, and to reassess one’s priorities and ends” (Vernay x). To do so, Vernay argues that the study of literature, as well as other humanities, ought to look towards science, specifically psychology and neuroscience. The Western world has for too long appreciated the logical and scientific, and the creative, emotional part of us has been considered less valuable. “[T]he psycholiterary approach [...] opens up a space in which the formation of our emotions, our joys and sorrows, loves and hatreds, and everything in between, can be openly examined and discussed, potentially improving our capacities for empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence” (Vernay xiv). No matter how educated, a reader manages to get involved in fiction. Emotions should therefore have a place in the discussion. Neuroscience is a science that might be able to conclude how empathy functions in the brain, and if reading has an empathetic effect on its readers.

Is there such a thing as a universal emotional response or empathetic reaction? Do all readers react similarly to the same narrative? Patrick Colm Hogan (1) argues the discussion about universalness often lead to arguments about one universal emotional response. That is, that all readers will react the same way to something considered to be universal, for example feeling for a character in distress. Hogan (1) focus his argument on Suzanne Keen, who does not believe that readers have the same empathetic reaction to the same narratives. “As such, and also as a feminist and even as a human being aware of the world around her, she is deeply sensitive to the implausibility of claims that people’s empathic responses are all the same” (Hogan 1). Hogan agrees with Keen that people around the world do not respond the same way to human suffering. However, he argues that there is such a thing as literary universals (1). He argues that literary universals do not mean that people feel the same or respond the same to an event or narrative. One such literary universal principle may be that people tend to be more empathic towards people within their own social group. However, this does not mean that they will all respond identically. Hogan suggests that a discussion about a universal does not have to be the same as saying that all readers will react the same way to a narrative, even if it has a universalness to it, as he argues that literature is often designed to create empathic reactions (3). Hogan (2) also adds that people’s individuality and personality will affect the way they react to a narrative. “Thus, two recipients of a story are likely to have different ethical reactions to a situation insofar as those recipients differ in the emotions and story structures they favor” (Hogan 2). This means that people have different preferences and will

therefore favour for example people of their own social group, or in-group, as Hogan calls it. Diversity in people's emotional response to narratives is also taken into account. Hogan proposes two categories of empathy. One has to do with how we react to people who are similar to us, and one, that purposes that we feel empathy towards someone because we have had similar experiences. He calls these *categorial* and *situational empathy* (4). The reason this is interesting in connection to James Baldwin and "Sonny's Blues" is because this thesis argues that the narrative has the ability to reach people across time and cultural boundaries, that there is a universalness to Baldwin's narrative. The situations that the narrator and Sonny are a part of might foster empathy from people who have experienced similar events. These people may necessarily be part of their identity group, but they are people with similar experiences to the characters. Likewise, people within their own identity group may feel empathy for them because they have lived a similar life, and share a commonality in identity, race, social standing and life condition. Even if Baldwin is narrating events and describing people within his own social group, Hogan suggests that authors have the ability to create characters from other identity groups that will also foster empathy: "as authors imagine the lives and experiences of out-group members in detail, they come to experience them as more fully human and to portray them in ways that manifest and are likely to foster empathy" (Hogan 4). Therefore, one could argue the same for readers. If an author has the ability to imagine a character of an out-group to an extent that readers feel empathy towards this character despite their being part of another group, it is easy to imagine that authors also has the ability to write about in-group members in such a way that out-group members would feel empathy for the characters. In other words, readers could feel empathy towards Baldwin's characters even if they are part of other social groups.

## **2.4 An Example Study of Empathy and Reading**

How can fiction affect readers when we all know it consists of fabricated stories written by an author? Jean-François Vernay begs the question, "how something that does not exist can manage to generate real feelings in readers" (Vernay xxiv). He argues that fiction opens for readers to dive into a world that mimics reality, even if it is not. Vernay questions how readers can feel for characters they know perfectly well are not real. Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley (175) suggest that literary fiction will never be a copy of reality. However, literary fiction is an abstract simulation of reality. Mar and Oatley (174-5) argue that

simulation has the purpose of creating access to information that is otherwise hard to get, or to understand. For example, a work of fiction would be a simulation of reality that might help people experience intricate social interactions they otherwise might not have encountered. “Literary fiction provides simulations of social complexes as they unfold, as characters interact with each other and react to the repercussions of plans and intrusions of accidents” (Mar and Oatley 175). They also argue that real life people create characters or impressions of others in their mind, which supposedly helps them get insight into the other person by being able to imagine what that person might think, want or feel (175). “Sonny’s Blues” could serve as a simulation of the lives of African Americans in the 1950’s. In this case, Mar and Oatley’s theory suggests that a reader of this short story would be given an insight into the complexities of life for African Americans. The benefit of fiction is thus that people have access to social interactions and situations that they might not otherwise have had.

David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013) also argue that reading literature helps people understand others. “The capacity to identify and understand others’ subjective states is one of the most stunning products of human evolution. It allows successful navigation of complex social relationships and helps to support the empathetic responses that maintain them” (Kidd and Castano 377). In their article, they argue that *theory of mind* is something people strive to teach their children. For example, children learn to care for another person by understanding their facial expression. Theory of mind is the ability to understand that another person has feelings, thoughts and a mind of their own, “that is, the capacity to imagine and appreciate other people’s mental state” (Vernay x). By being able to understand each other, we can successfully navigate complex social relationships (Kidd and Castano 377). One of the things we do to maintain and refine this understanding is reading literature. Kidd and Castano argue that fiction, especially, has a positive effect on readers: “fiction may change how, not just what, people think about others” (Kidd and Castano 377). They argue that reading fiction not only makes us understand ourselves better, but it also teaches us to understand others by “helping us recognize our similarity to them” (Kidd and Castano 377). Fiction leaves a lot up to readers to understand, thus forcing the reader to make connections and put themselves in the shoes of the characters. Often, this is accomplished by a first-person narrator. In addition to this, as fiction is not real, it poses less of a threat to the reader than reality: “The worlds of fiction, though, pose fewer risks than the real world, and they present opportunities to consider the experiences of others without facing the potentially threatening consequences of that engagement” (Kidd and Castano 378). Therefore, a reader can read

“Sonny’s Blues” at a safe distance from the actual real-world problem of poverty or drug addiction. This distance allows readers to imagine themselves into the narrative, without having to think of the possible consequences that a real-life situation could bring forth.

## 2.5 An Empathetic Reading

How do we read empathetically? As mentioned earlier, many critics state that the non-professional reader already relies on their empathy when they read. This might be because they do not have the same terms available as a professional reader. Some of the narrative techniques that are associated with empathy are “first person narration and the interior representation of characters’ consciousness and emotional state-as devices supporting character identification” (Keen x). Identifying with a character is important for a reader to be able to understand and feel for that character. Keen does not, however, seem to limit her views to canonical works, as she frequently uses the non-professional reader as an example. These readers do tend to read mass-marketed books, and they rely on their emotions. Even if Vernay agrees with reasserting emotion back into literary studies, he seems to prefer some books above others. He argues that the book and its author are more important to him than providing us with a method for reading it. He states: “the choice of book and author are paramount because it is not so much about providing a reading formula as about sharing one’s sensibility as a reader in order to illuminate a work’s multiple levels of meaning” (Vernay 14). To do so, Vernay suggests that criticism should be focused on adding value to the book, not deconstructing it into reviews or study notes. Reading as a way of constructing a personal version of a text is what leads readers to read to understand a work, not to enjoy it. Doing so is hard, because one of the things that makes a professional reader professional is that they are taught an academic language and terminology. For example, we are all taught to never use first person singular in formal essays or analysis. Even if Vernay wishes to open for using *I*, he warns against it because the idea is not to interpret at text after your own likes and dislikes. This will quickly turn into what he calls a “preferential discourse” (Vernay 15). In his work about bringing love of literature back into literary discourse, Vernay suggests that an analysis of a book or short story should be suggestive: “Any analysis made should not be prescriptive but rather offer suggestions, in the sense that it offers a point of view for a reading of the text” (Vernay 7).

There are three aspects of literary art that affect how readers can be influenced by reading. Djikic and Oatley's (502) aspects are simulation, fluctuations in our personalities and indirect communication.

In relation to the first aspect – that of simulation – we suggest that we engage in the story, first of all, by identifying with the main character. (...) the second aspect is that because as readers we have taken on the concerns of the protagonist, it is we ourselves – not any fictional character – who experience the emotions of the story. The third aspect of artistic literature is that the writer's communication to the reader is indirect. (Djikic and Oatley 502)

Djikic and Oatley (500) compare literature to a flight simulator: a person who wishes to learn to fly an airplane should practice with a flight simulator. Likewise, literature is a simulator of the world. Literature simulates how people live their lives, what they say and do, and how they deal with the world around them. Therefore, reading literature could improve the reader's understanding of others because we experience their world through literature, even if it is fiction. Fiction might be especially suited because it often deals with subject matters of the human condition and how people live their lives. Djikic and Oatley argue that the type of literature a reader reads is important. They argue that some genres are written to make people feel a certain way. For example, a crime novel is supposed to make us feel scared or on our toes. They further argue that genres like this will not have a long-term effect on the readers empathy or personality. "Emotion is important to personality change, but not emotion as programmed by writers who have decided in advance that they want their readers to be anxious (in a thriller), or horrified (in a horror story), and suchlike" (Djikic and Oatley 501). James Baldwin's short story is therefore suitable for an investigation of empathy because it is fiction. Even if fiction also causes a reaction in the reader, it does not do so in the same way as a thriller or horror story. Being scared by a horror story is a short-lived reaction. The topic of Baldwin's fiction and the interpersonal relationships between the characters in "Sonny's Blues" are not action-filled and thrilling, and much is left up to the reader to understand, thus initiating an interaction between the reader and the story on a more personal or emotional level than a crime novel might have.



### 3 James Baldwin

James Baldwin was a New York-born writer of novels and short-stories. He was born in 1924 in Harlem, New York. Harlem then, as it is today, was a place that struggled with poverty and poor living conditions for its inhabitants (Ferré-Sadurní). Most of the population in Harlem consisted of African Americans, or other people of colour. Life in Harlem had not changed much over the last few generations, and Baldwin stresses that his parents grew up the same way he did (Baldwin “Notes” 59). The condition of Harlem is one of the major topics of Baldwin’s “Sonny’ Blues.” His stepfather was a minister in a church, which Baldwin also was for a few years. This might be where he learned his oratory skills. Baldwin was a black, gay man living in a white society. According to Richard Bausch and R.V Cassill “Much of his work aimed at unravelling the repressive myths of white society and at healing the disastrous estrangement he found in the lives of black people” (21). Baldwin was active in the Civil Rights Movement. His writing focuses on the lives of African Americans, and how politics and society are unable to speak about racial problems in a manner that will cause anything to change.

#### 3.1 Baldwin’s relevance today

James Baldwin is relevant today because his writing manages to reach people across time, physical borders, race, and social conditions. In short, his writing has the ability to generate empathy in its readers. As Ronald Bieganowski (69) states, the topics of Baldwin’s fiction are identity, and often a sensation of being dislocated from society. The sense of being different and isolated from society is an emotion that people can relate to as much today as in the fifties, when “Sonny’s Blues” was published. In 2016, Raoul Peck released his documentary *I am Not Your Negro*, a documentary about James Baldwin, as much as it is about the state of America today. The documentary exemplifies why the author is still relevant today, because the living conditions for African Americans are not that different today compared with when Baldwin grew up. In an interview about the making of the documentary, Peck (Peck) argues that Baldwin’s writing is very much relevant to today: “All you heard in the film was written fifty years ago, you know, and you felt that he sat down this morning and wrote that down” (Peck). In the documentary, Baldwin’s writing is accompanied by images both from TV and newspapers, but also by news imagery from 2016. The director experienced a sense of disbelief when his search for relevant imagery for the documentary

was being produced right in front of him. This exemplifies how Baldwin's narration has remained relevant because the topics of his narratives are equally as alive today as they were in America in the 1950s. Because of the documentary, Baldwin was put back on the map also in Norway. As Inger Bentzrud of the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet* puts it, it was just a matter of time before readers would rediscover James Baldwin (Bentzrud 2017). About his own writing, Baldwin states, "it is only because the world looks on his talent with such a frightening indifference that the artist is compelled to make his talent important" (Baldwin "Notes" 4). Baldwin narrates the lives of people in Harlem for readers to get a glimpse of their world. His writing constitutes an effort to make readers able to identify with people who are dislocated from society.

Baldwin's writing is also important because of his focus on drug addiction. Eva Kowalska (1) argues for the relevance of "Sonny's Blues" due to the topic of drug addiction, a topic that is well suited to the discussion of empathy. According to her, the story is "valuable as a statement on literature dealing with the dynamics associated with drugs, as well as the possibility of reading such work with empathy in order to gain insight into this subculture" (Kowalska 1). If people read the short story as a story about drug addiction, they will learn about drug addiction. In contrast to information leaflets, fiction, as well as autobiographical texts, will give the reader someone's first-hand experience with addiction. Baldwin can tell the story from two viewpoints. One is the story about how a character deals with his brother's addiction. The other is how the drug addict deals with it himself. Any reader with first-hand experience with the devastating effects of drug addiction can relate to the image of a block of ice trickling through the veins of the narrator when he thinks about it. On the other side, there is the drug addict, who sees drugs as just another way of dealing with or escaping the conditions he is in. In "Sonny's Blues," Sonny explains his addiction as a means of coping with the world around him: "why *do* people suffer? Maybe it's better to do something to give it a reason, *any* reason" (Baldwin "Sonny" 39). Instead of being present, witnessing and experiencing the world, he escapes it in a heroin high. To him, numbing himself with drugs is better than seeing all the suffering around him, even if it does not make it any better in the end. By giving the reader both brothers' experience with drug addiction, Baldwin is able to provide the bigger picture through two perspectives, subsequently opening for a broader audience to be able to identify with either the drug addict or his relatives. As addiction is such a widespread problem that takes on many shapes and sizes, the topic can

reach many readers. The reader does not have to know a heroin addict to be able to understand the struggle of drug abuse.

Baldwin's ability to imagine others' experiences is another reason his narratives are important. The ability to put ourselves in another man's shoes is exactly what empathy is. Charles Duncan argues that Baldwin, through his writings, suggests that people can learn, understand and change their minds: "through Brother's example, readers might also become more willing to accept attitudes and lifestyles that do not conform to social convention" (Duncan 1). Even if Baldwin's stories are fiction, his characters and settings are based on reality. Readers will be able to more easily imagine themselves in Baldwin's fictional worlds, since they are reflections of the real world around us. Baldwin's writings on the lives of African Americans may also make him more reliable. This is because he will gain credibility because he is writing about the lives of people within his own identity group. Even if fiction is not real, the reality of the fictional characters is. Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia Wallace, editors of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, state: "No black writer has been better able to imagine white experience, to speak in various tones of different kinds and behaviors of people or places other than his own" (Klinkowitz and Wallace 1381). In other words, his writing reflects situations he is familiar with, like the lives of people in Harlem, the struggle with drugs, social conditions, and being a black man in America. In addition to this, he is able to imagine himself into the worlds of other people as well. To be able to write about someone other than himself, he demonstrates that he can imagine himself in their shoes. That is, Baldwin is able to have empathy with other people. Therefore, you could say his experiences give a profound base for writing fiction that can reach millions of people.

### **3.2 "Sonny's Blues"**

"Sonny's Blues" was first published in 1957 in a magazine called *Partisan Review* (Reilly 56). This short story, and several others, were later published in his collection of short stories called *Going to Meet the Man*. "Sonny's Blues" was published in America in a time when America was changing. "Postwar existence revealed different kind of men and women, with new aspirations among both majority and minority populations. New possibilities for action empowered individuals and groups in the pursuit of personal freedom and individual self-expression" (Klinkowitz and Wallace 1129). After the war, black American soldiers refused to be treated as second class citizens, women refused to stay at home, and the Civil

Rights Movement struck the country. Baldwin's short story describes a minority in America whose members did not have the same possibilities as members of the majority. Being in a situation that does not change or is difficult to change is a major topic in the short story. As a result, his character is only able to change within the limitations that society has put on him. Baldwin's political engagement is therefore apparent in his work.

Ernesto Javier Martínez states that Baldwin's characters in *Another Country* are unable to bring forth any change in their lives. He also states that the novel has an underlying emphasis on wanting to change the lives of people in America, especially in the Black American and gay communities. "It emphasizes the need to challenge the racist and homophobic status quo of the American 1950s" (Martínez 782). Similarly, Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" presents characters stuck in a vicious circle that they cannot escape. The narrator, an algebra teacher, and his brother have both left life in Harlem, but are unable to escape its grasp completely. According to Baldwin, "Those who get out always left something of themselves behind" (Baldwin "Sonny" 27). Exactly what this is, is never explicitly told to the reader. However, both the narrator and Sonny are influenced by having grown up in Harlem. Sonny, even after trying to escape, can not. One of the reasons is his drug addiction. The narrator has left the street where they grew up, but still lives and works in Harlem as a teacher. Baldwin hints that what people who leave Harlem have left behind is all the people still living in Harlem. "It's always at the hour of trouble and confrontation that the missing member aches" (Baldwin "Sonny" 27). The "members" refers to the limbs of the bodies of the people that have been left behind. This phrase also denotes that the limbs are their friends, family and local community members, who still struggle but survive in Harlem.

"Notes of a Native Son" is a personal essay in the essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*. It was published in 1958 and contain several essays about his own life and the lives of African Americans in the period before the civil rights movement. In the essay, Baldwin describes the death of his strict father, and how this death forces him to see his father for the first time. It depicts the realisation that he will be weighed down by the same thing that made his father into the bitter man that he was; the colour of his skin. The essay also describes the lives of people in Harlem, and how their skin colour inevitably will make them bitter as well. It is not only bitterness, but anger and a *fever*, which they can never escape. In contrast to this, Baldwin narrates the realisation that it is not the colour of their skin, but society that creates this tension, a tension that will stay in his heart, most likely because the world around him does not seem to change.

## 4 Empathy in Sonny's Blues

“Sonny’s Blues” incorporates many topics that can be linked with empathy. The short story asks of the reader to take part in the narrator’s journey as he reads about his brother, talks to friends of his brother and learns about their stories. The result of reading and listening to the stories is that the narrator finally understands his brother, and those like him. Baldwin’s short story begs the reader to take part in the same transition that the narrator goes through. This transition is going from turning a blind eye to finally feeling empathy. Empathy is exemplified in the narrative in different ways. One of them is through the focus on the narrator and the act of reading. In addition, the topic of Harlem and the lack of possibilities for its citizens is a major theme. Music is also a way that Baldwin’s narrative urges the reader to listen. Music is a means of nonverbal communication between the narrator and his brother. Symbolism is also an important element of how the narrative open up for readers to identify with the characters. One example of symbolism is the naming of the characters.

### 4.1 Sonny

The first thing that the reader encounters is the title of the story: “Sonny’s Blues.” Immediately, the reader’s attention is drawn towards the topic of music. The word *blues* has two different meanings, as it is both a music genre as well as an emotional state. The word *blues* can denote struggles or hardship, sadness or melancholia, as in feeling *blue*, or having *the blues*. As mentioned earlier, the average reader relies on their emotions when they read a book. Even in the title, the author taps into the emotions of the readers, as *the blues* is something that many people would be able to relate to. In addition to *blues*, the name in the title, Sonny, bears with it other connotations. According to *A Dictionary of First Names*, the name Sonny is “originally a nickname, from a pet form of the word *son* used as an affectionate term of address, but now used quite frequently as a first name in its own right” (“Sonny”). Already in the title, Baldwin begs the reader to empathise with Sonny. As the reader learns that Sonny is the name of the brother of the narrator, the meaning of the name could fit both dictionary descriptions. Sonny is both a nickname for the son of somebody, an affectionate term, as well as the name of the character. Because this name is connected to affection, Baldwin taps into the reader’s emotions, possibly inviting them to feel with the character even before they know Sonny’s story. As a term of endearment, the name also has a universalness to it. It could be anybody’s son, daughter, brother or friend. That way, Baldwin

has created a link between a fictional character and a group of people in the real world in which the reader can focus her or his empathetic reaction.

The link between real life and fiction is also created in the similarities between “Sonny’s Blues” and Baldwin’s essay “Notes of a Native Son”. In Baldwin’s fiction, the reader learns that Sonny is a drug addict who struggles to make sense of the world and his place in it. Sonny is just an example of what might happen to a person who lives a life that is limited because of the society he lives in. The narrator describes the lives of the boys he sees in Harlem like this: “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” (Baldwin “Sonny” 22). Sonny was like one of these boys, growing up with limited possibilities which ultimately led to his ruin. Similarly, in Baldwin’s essay, life as an African American is a helpless endeavour. “All over Harlem, Negro boys and girls are growing into stunted maturity trying desperately to find a place to stand; and the wonder is not that so many are ruined, but that so many survive” (Baldwin “Notes” 73). The similarities in content of the two narratives creates a link between Baldwin’s fiction and his essay. By linking the two, a reader who feels empathy for Sonny, might be able to transfer their empathy towards real life people. Baldwin’s essay might contribute to this, as his essay are more like a personal narrative than fiction. If readers realise that the sadness and cruelty that takes place in “Sonny’s Blues”, also takes place in the real world, perhaps their empathy can be directed towards real life people and lead them to want to make a change in the world.

Baldwin’s *Sonny* could be anybody’s son. *Sonny* could be the son of Baldwin’s father, Baldwin himself, America’s son, Harlem’s son, your son or our son. If we understand Sonny as a son of America, or Harlem, for that matter, this understanding highlights how society has a role in shaping its members. In suggesting this possibility, Baldwin gives the reader a responsibility for Sonny. Because of inequality and poverty, prejudice and segregation, the character has led a hard life with little or no possibility to escape and live the American dream. Society is partially responsible. Thus, by naming him with a term used for endearment, Baldwin asks the reader to feel for Sonny. Readers can easily identify with the role of being a son or having a son. As identification is a key element for readers to get emotionally involved with the characters, naming the main character Sonny can affect the emotions of the reader.

In contrast to naming one of the characters Sonny, the narrator does not have a name. As mentioned earlier, using first-person narration can make it easier for the reader to identify with the story. A nameless character can be anybody. This proposes two possible reactions: One is that the reader can imagine themselves as the narrator. Perhaps readers who are themselves big brothers would be able to imagine themselves as the narrator. On the other hand, having the narrator nameless opens up for the possibility that the reader would not have an emotional reaction towards him. This may be because the focus in this story is Sonny, not the narrator. A nameless character could thus be nobody, at the same time as anybody. Creating a character like this enables readers of diverse backgrounds to find someone in the story that they could relate to. As mentioned above, Hogan suggests that we tend to feel for people within our own identity group, or for people who have similar experiences to our own. You can imagine that Sonny evokes empathy based on being a named person, who both people with a similar identity and a similar life situation could identify with.

## 4.2 Reading

The very beginning of the short story focuses on the importance of reading as Baldwin's short story demonstrates the importance of and the effect reading can have on people. In the opening lines of "Sonny's Blues," Baldwin describes the act of reading: "I read about it in the paper" (Baldwin "Sonny" 21). By starting his short story with this, Baldwin emphasises the act of reading. It is as if Baldwin wishes the reader to become aware of how the act of reading might affect her or him. In this opening paragraph, the reader does not know whom or what the narrator has read about, much like the average reader in the beginning of a story. The only thing that is revealed is how the narrator reacts to what he has read. "I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again" (Baldwin "Sonny" 21). By shifting the focus from the act of reading to how the reader is affected by what he read, Baldwin has demonstrated how the act of reading affects the reader. In the short story, the narrator reads about his brother and reacts with confusion. In order to take in what he has read, he must read it again, which forces him to believe what the story says. The narrator has to read the story again because he could not believe what he has read, perhaps he had to do it because what he has read forced him to recall something or someone he had not thought about for a long time. No matter what the reason, his initial emotion is that of shock and confusion. Baldwin aligns the narrator and the

reader, as they are both in the act of reading. The narrator's reaction to reading is an example of how the author wants the reader to react.

The message of the opening paragraph of "Sonny's Blues" is empathy. The narrator experiences an emotional reaction when he reads about Sonny, his brother, in the paper: "He became real to me again" (Baldwin "Sonny" 22). By reading about his brother, he is forced to think about him again. In doing so, he is forced to yet again feel for him: "I was scared, scared for Sonny" (Baldwin "Sonny" 21). At the face of it, the narrator has had an emotional reaction to reading because he has read about his brother. Family ties could cause an empathetic response because of the already established relationship between the two. However, the opening paragraph is important for the remaining part of the story, because it prepares the readers for the emotional journey they are about to take. This is because they are invited to take part in the emotional reactions that the narrator experiences. Looking past the initial conclusion, what Baldwin says is that reading makes people real. As already mentioned, it does not matter that a fictional character is not real, the reader might still experience empathetic responses.

Baldwin asks the reader to experience his characters as real, real enough to empathise with and understand them. To do so, he creates bridges between the reader and the text. These bridges are characters, themes, situations, and faces that readers might recognize and therefore more easily feel for. Baldwin does this by not revealing too much about the narrator in the beginning of the narrative. In the opening paragraphs, the readers learn that the narrator is a man with a teaching job, and that he has a brother. He experiences a very strong physical reaction because of something he has read. The reader also learns that the narrator is very concerned for his brother. Concern is an emotion that can be understood by many, as the feeling of concern for someone close to you could be said to be a universal emotional reaction. Therefore, readers across borders, both physical and social-political, can relate to the narrator of Baldwin's short story. Similarly, the reader of his essay "Notes of a Native Son", is taken through the emotional movement from childhood to young adulthood, and the realisation that the colour of the authors skin would have devastating effects on his life.

Reading and writing become a big part of what brings the two characters together. First, the narrator reads about his brother, he then writes to him, and then he reads the letters he gets in return. The only time first-person narration by Sonny is used is when Sonny writes a personal letter to the narrator. "You don't know how much I needed to hear from you. I



wanted to write you many a time but I dug how I must have hurt you and so I didn't write" (Baldwin "Sonny" 25). In the letter, Sonny speaks directly to the narrator, saying that he understands why there has been so little contact between the two. The letter opens with gratitude towards the narrator, who has reached out to him through writing. This notion invites empathy because the personal letter drives the story forward. After reading the letter, the narrator feels guilty, and begins to re-establish contact with his brother. In the rest of the short story, Sonny is either viewed through the narrator's perspective, or he is described through music and movement. Therefore, the content of the letter functions as a step further into understanding Sonny. After reading the letter, it becomes clear that Sonny is able to understand how his choices in life have affected his brother.

"Sonny's Blues" cries out to the reader to reflect on the stories of others, especially the stories of the outcasts in society, or outsiders of their own group. The focus on differences causes the reader to reflect and understand that we all have stories to tell. These stories may cause people to understand each other better, and as a result feel for one another. Especially for those who is an outcast in society. In "Sonny's Blues", Sonny's mother describes her opinion of why someone ends up in a bad situation, like Sonny, or his ragged friend: "It ain't a question of his being a good boy,' Mama said, 'nor of his having good sense. It ain't only the bad ones, nor yet the dumb ones that gets sucked under'" (Baldwin "Sonny" 29). It has not mattered that Sonny was a good boy growing up, or that he was clever, in the end he became addicted to drugs and became an outcast. The underlying message in Baldwin's story is that no matter who you are, you can still end up on the outside of society. After his mother shared her life experience, the narrator is able to broaden his horizon and look at Sonny's drug addicted friend in a different light. At a moment of pause to look past the exterior and into the story of the person in front of him, the narrator *sees* the person he is talking about for the first time: "Then I felt guilty – guilty, probably, for never having supposed that the poor bastard *had* a story of his own" (B 23). The narrator had not considered that Sonny's friend had a story, because he was an outcast. The only emotion he felt for him was sympathy. After realising that this person also has a story, that probably would say that he was not always *bad*, the narrator was able to feel empathy for the character. The repetition of the word *guilty* emphasises the word and makes it clear that the assumption that others do not have a story to tell should cause a sense of guilt. The author is spelling it out to the reader by describing how the narrator felt a sense of responsibility after reading his brother's story in the paper, and in the interaction between the narrator and Sonny's friend he continues to ask the reader to do

the same. Read, reflect and understand. “When I saw the papers” (23): The sentence has only changed by one word, continuing the focus on seeing. This idea is reinforced by the focus on eye contact and direct questions between Sonny’s friend and the narrator. By repeatedly using the word *look*, it is as if Baldwin asks of the reader to pause, to take a closer look at the paragraph at hand.

The repetition of words in the short story emphasises the importance of those words. Words that appear often and are often repeated within the same section. Examples of such words are: read, stare, spelling and subway. “I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it and I couldn’t believe it, and I read it again” (Baldwin “Sonny” 21). Here, the repetition of the word *read*, creates a rhythm, almost soothing like the sound of the subway moving over the subway tracks, read, read, read. It seems that not only does this put emphasis on the word read, but it also denotes something about the emotional state of the narrator. He has just read about his own brother, and without the reader knowing what the news article said, the reader might be able to pick up on the atmosphere. It is as if the narrator needs to calm himself after reading about his brother. Further, the paragraph moves towards other words, like spelling out and stare. “Then perhaps I stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside” (Baldwin “Sonny” 21). By not spelling out the story, the focus on it grabs the reader’s attention. In addition, the narrator stares at the text. Staring without words that describes the emotion. The words in the news article could be read in the narrators surrounding and on the faces of the people around him. This denotes that what he read might have been a common story. A story that could have happened to any of the people in the subway car, and not just him. The repetition of words gives the feeling that the narrator is delivering a speech. He has something important to say and the reader must pay attention. The repetition of words makes it clear that there is something that the readers should pay attention to. It is as if he says that people should read it, stare at it and notice that the story is not only on paper, but in the faces of the people around us.

In the short story, the message is spelled out and emphasised through repetitions, as if the author asks the reader to notice those particular words. Another repetition is the repetition of the word *subway*. “I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work” (Baldwin “Sonny” 21). By repeating the word several times, Baldwin asks the reader to question why. One of the reasons may be to ask where the narrator is when he read the paper. The subway

car is public transportation that connects the different areas in New York, carrying the connotation of a place where one is transported from one place to another, yet the narrator is still inside the boundaries of Harlem. Public transport also reveals to the reader something about the narrator's economy. He has a job as a teacher but does not have a car of his own. Baldwin also compares the subway to the outside world. "I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside" (Baldwin "Sonny" 21). This is the darkness of the subway tunnel. It is also the darkness of Harlem that the narrator recognises in the faces of the people around him.

One of the literary techniques used in this short story is indirectly asked questions directed towards the reader. As mentioned earlier, Djikic and Oatley argue that literature indirectly communicates with the reader (502-3). That is, the reader's actions are not changed by literature, but their personalities or their way of thinking about others can be. The questions asked are embedded in the text, but it is often not clear to whom they are directed. "Anyway, what the hell *can* I do about it" (Baldwin "Sonny" 23), is one such phrase. Since the phrase is part of a dialogue with another character, it is can easily be understood as part of that dialogue, not as part of an inner monologue. However, the question here is part of an inner monologue, and it is a question the narrator asks to himself. As the narrator starts thinking to himself, it is as if he turns towards the reader. In addition to being a question one often asks oneself, the open-endedness directs this question directly to the reader. The question bridges the gap between reality and fiction, causing the reader to reflect, *what can I do about it?* The question is relevant to the notion of empathy because it is a question we often ask ourselves. In one sense, the question enables a person to renounce the fact that he can help. In other words, you could ask yourself this question and justify within yourself why you are not doing anything to help others. By asking this question, the reader is urged to reflect on *what can you do?* This also aligns with the notion of inviting the reader to take the same journey as the narrator, from sympathising to empathising with Sonny. Baldwin's narrative will show the reader what he can do about it, as the narrator's development finally shows him what he can do.

As the story spends time on the surroundings of the narrator, the focus is directed towards the reality surrounding the narrator, the physical world and the other people that occupy the same space: "I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people" (Baldwin "Sonny" 21). The setting becomes a moving picture of that moment

in time when he reads someone's story. The story about his brother that he read in the paper is in some way universal. "I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face" (21). The narrator sees the story in his own face, and in the faces of the other people in the subway car. It could be anyone's story. People on the subway are anonymous moving beings with no names. They are bodies with stories that we never get to know, moving forwards in a metal box without being affected by one another. In the sentence, Baldwin moves away from the written word on paper and into the world around it. The stories that you read in the paper are also written on the faces of the people around you. The narrator sees this, and he also sees it in his own face. All the people on that subway have something in common, a story: "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" (Baldwin "Sonny" 22). Outside of the subway car is Harlem. The narrator describes Harlem as a vicious circle that none of its inhabitants can escape. "All of Harlem is pervaded by a sense of congestion, rather like the insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the windows shut" (Baldwin "Notes" 59). Windows shut are the opportunities closed off for the black man. The roofs of the public housing units stop them from reaching their full potential. By focusing on the setting, Baldwin emphasises the living conditions in Harlem. The section also urges the reader to become aware of the faces around them. What are the stories in those faces? Baldwin's narrator can see their stories in his own face as well, and in doing so, he asks the reader to become aware that people are not that different from each other. In other people's faces, people can see their own stories, thus becoming able to identify with each other more easily.

On the faces of the parents of Sonny and the author of "Notes of a Native Son", the reader might be able to see the stories and the result of African Americans living in America. Like the children in Harlem today, the parents grew up bumping their heads in the ceiling of their possibilities. Their stories too, are not narrated in "Sonny's Blues", but the narrator is able to see that there is a gravity of the situation in their faces. "The silence, the darkness coming, and the darkness in the faces frighten the child obscurely" (Baldwin "Sonny" 28). The faces of the grown-ups are darkening in pace with the darkening of the clouds and their faces eventually become dark like the darkness of the situation outside their window. This darkness is something that the child is not able to understand until the child has grown up to realise that they cannot become more than society will let them. In other words, they cannot escape their

Harlem or the boundaries that society has built around them. Similarly, in “Notes of a Native Son” Baldwin talks about the reaction of his father, when he is faced with one of Baldwin’s teachers. “I had no way of knowing that he was facing in that living room a wholly unprecedented and frightening situation” (Baldwin “Notes” 93). His father was faced with the entire white population, in the form of a school teacher. Her whiteness was a symbol of the inequality and hardships he had to endure in his life. And even if the school teacher would become a helper and friend of the family, his father would always look for something in her face that would reveal her true motif for helping them. The darkness in the faces of Sonny’s parents is the darkness that society put upon the African American people.

The darkness and bitterness are handed down from one generation to the next, perhaps not because parents teach their children to become bitter, but because the children grow up to learn exactly what their parents learnt. In “Sonny’s Blues”, the narrator and Sonny’s mother expresses her wish that this inheriting her generation’s bitterness should not happen. “I ain’t telling you all this,” she said, ‘to make you scared or bitter or to make you hate nobody. I’m telling you this because you got a brother. And the world ain’t changed”’ (Baldwin “Sonny” 30). The narrator’s mother does not want to teach her children bitterness, and she does not want her children to hate all white people because a select group of them has caused their family harm. The mother has understood something that the reader should see as well. She has understood that it is not the colour of a person’s skin, but their actions that makes them evil. In contrast, Baldwin’s father in “Notes of a Native Son” seems unable to see things as clearly as Sonny’s mother. Baldwin’s father is frightened of white people, because he had grown accustomed to injustice and being at the mercy of white people. To the father, a white school teacher was to him the image of society. She was one with all other white people, and white people were not to be trusted. This fear would ultimately be transferred to his children as they grew up to experience first-hand how the white man’s society treated an African American. Baldwin describes how he tried to be served at restaurants only to be told that these restaurant did not serve *Negros*: “I saw for the first time, the restaurant, the people with their mouths open, already, as it seemed to me, rising as one man, and I realized what I had done, and where I was, and I was frightened” (Baldwin “Notes” 99). In this instance, the people in the restaurant became one person, one white person. Similarly to the school teacher who became a symbol of all white people in one, to his father. By contrasting the two stories, it becomes clear that Baldwin does not believe that it is the colour of a person’s skin that makes a person evil. These are mere examples of attitudes that some African Americans are

born into. Some white Americans treat African Americans as lesser human beings. Some African Americans are brought up into a bitterness that makes them too, blind, and a result of the society in which they live. By focusing on fear, a reader might experience empathy for the characters because fear is one of the basic emotions. If a reader understands that this kind of fear revolves around another human being, based on the colour of their skin, perhaps they will understand the absurd but real situation that society functions to keep the distinction between black and white real. Fear, bitterness and anger will not make place for a common ground to work out differences, come to terms and see each other for what they are, humans or Americans, not black or white Americans.

The notion of bitterness is an example where a reader can experience situational empathy. As mentioned earlier, situational empathy in readers occur when they can relate to a character or person based on having similar experiences to themselves. The feeling of bitterness is mentioned throughout Baldwin's essay collection, and he uses this to describe both his own feelings as well as the feeling that inevitably makes it impossible for the African American and white American to live in harmony. In other words, this bitterness makes it hard for whites and blacks to understand each other, and therefore feel empathy for each other.

It is this bitterness – felt alike by the inarticulate, hungry population of Harlem, by the wealthy on Sugar Hill, and by the brilliant exceptions ensconced in universities – which has defeated and promises to continue to defeat all efforts of interracial understanding (Baldwin "Notes" 72).

The inability to escape Harlem and the colour of his skin, is ultimately what creates Sonny's downfall. Living as an African American in America in the 1950s was not easy. Baldwin's generation were just a few generations after slavery, and the remnants, views and attitudes towards African Americans were still highly negative (Baldwin "Notes" 88). In contrast to Baldwin, Sonny is an example of the inarticulate of Harlem. As we will see later, he was only ever able to communicate through his music. Sonny is faced with the same low ceilings and the reader would only assume that he also would experience how the white world receives him as a black man.

In "Sonny's Blues", Harlem becomes synonymous with skin colour. Harlem was and still is a district in New York that is mostly populated by African Americans. As mentioned earlier, the narrator and Sonny are unable to escape Harlem. As they travel back into Harlem,

the people in it is used to describe the area. “Yet, as the cab moved uptown through the streets which seemed, with a rush, to darken with dark people” (Baldwin “Sonny” 27). Thus, Harlem is tightly knit with the people who live there, and the colour of their skin describes the darkness of the area. This darkness, as described earlier, is the injustices they live with on a daily basis. Since the colour of one’s skin is not something a person can escape, it becomes clear that Harlem, like skin colour, is something that a person brings with him wherever he goes. By connecting Harlem to skin-colour, “Sonny’s Blues” becomes a story not only about a struggling musician and his brother, but also about the struggling African American. Thus, Baldwin’s fiction ties together African Americans all over the world, and not just those in Harlem. In other words, by connecting the struggles of growing up in Harlem to skin colour, readers might see that these struggles are relevant not only to those who are brought up in Harlem. The struggle of Sonny becomes a struggle that encompasses all African Americans. Therefore, readers are urged to look at a bigger picture of suffering that might lead them to feel empathy for people in similar life situations as Sonny and people in Harlem.

### **4.3 Music**

Music in “Sonny’s Blues” becomes another language for communication. Music is an affective language capable of arousing empathy in the listener. Baldwin is aware of this affect, as he describes the narrator watching people listening to nuns singing a hymn in the street: “As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them” (Baldwin “Sonny” 37). Music can be a language everyone can understand. In the short story, music is eventually what enables the narrator to understand his brother more fully. Music is Sonny’s medium for communicating with the world around him. His struggle to communicate with his brother is created because they speak different languages. “The seven years’ difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm: I wondered if these years would ever operate between us as a bridge” (Baldwin “Sonny” 26). The age gap, as well as having different interests and priorities in life, makes it difficult for the two brothers to communicate with each other. The narrator uses words to express himself, whilst Sonny uses music to make sense of the world around him. Eva Kowalska argues that:

Sonny is sound: an arrangement of sound so expressive that he eventually allows, in a profound moment of enlightenment in a darkened cellar nightclub, his brother to feel that

he can make sense of not just his own suffering and joy, but of these emotional experiences on a universal human level. (3)

Sonny lives and breathes music. Through music, he can speak to his brother, which leaves his brother in tears. The strong affect music has on the listener is ultimately what causes the brother to finally listen. Sonny is not only playing or communicating his own suffering, but the suffering of an entire people. “Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others” (Baldwin “Sonny” 43). These lives may be the lives of all other struggling musicians, drug addicts, brothers, people in Harlem or human beings. Baldwin (A 57) argues that it is impossible for African Americans not to sing the blues because their lives are permeated with hardship. Likewise, it is impossible for Sonny to not sing the blues. Sonny is playing the blues for himself, and for the people in Harlem. The most important part is that someone should listen to the blues and what it is trying to communicate. Hazel Arnett Ervin argues that blues denotes a collective experience: “There are in the blues personal sentiments and collective expressions of experiences; cultural responses to oppression and suffering; and collective as well as personal struggles for survival and freedom” (40). Collective experiences of African Americans through history have included slavery, oppression, segregation and a continuous struggle for being considered as equals. The notion of suffering follows Sonny throughout the short story, and at the ending of the narrative, he is able to communicate this to his brother as well as the reader. The short story starts off with being a personal story about the two brothers, but at the last moment, it incorporates the lives of not only those who live in Harlem now, but all those who have suffered up until that moment. “As music, the blues are considered by many black to be a reflection of and a release from the suffering they endured through and since the days of slavery” (Albert 179). Charles Duncan (1) argues that American people are not able to understand Sonny’s blues because they are unwilling to understand them. This is because the blues incorporates so much suffering that has been caused over the years. Duncan (1) also argues that it is only through music that African Americans have been able to tell their story. Thus, music becomes the language that can be used to make people listen.

“Sonny’s Blues” is James Baldwin’s blues. As Sonny and the Creole, a fellow musician, wanted the narrator to listen to the sounds of their suffering, so does Baldwin ask the reader to listen to the words of his generation’s version of the same story. “Listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen” (Baldwin “Sonny” 43). The suffering felt by the characters in “Sonny’s Blues” is universal, because it encompasses the struggle to survive and basic human



need for food, housing and freedom. With every new generation, it becomes a matter of listening to those who suffer. Baldwin finishes his short story, addressing the universality of the hardship of his characters. “And this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation” (Baldwin “Sonny” 43). The music motif implies a suggestion that music is a language understood beyond words, class, borders or social standing. By giving Sonny his own voice through music, the narrator can translate it for the readers, into words. The message is expressed twice, which eventually has the possibility to reach a broader audience of people. That is, despite personal knowledge and experience, Sonny’s struggle can be heard through written language and sound, even if there is not actual sound.

The audience/reader is forced to immerse themselves into the story and take an active part in interpreting both the silence, and the sound of Sonny and the narrator. “The capacity also pertains to his readers, and the implicit requirement of ‘Sonny’s Blues’ is for the reader to make space within their consciousness for the character’s troubled experience” (Kowalska 6). Sonny is the embodiment of music. It is as big a part of him as his heroin addiction. The narrator is struggling to understand both his brother’s addiction and his life choice in becoming a musician. “I don’t want you to think it had anything to do with me being a musician” (Baldwin “Sonny” 25). To the narrator, music and drug addiction go hand in hand. Duncan (1) argues that by making music Sonny’s voice, the brother has to narrate his story to the reader, hoping that the brother or the reader eventually will understand Sonny’s story through his music. “The narrator is able to complete his tale when he translates that sound into words” (Kowalska 3). In the end, it is Sonny’s solo that gives the narrator the understanding he needs. It opens for empathy as “attempting to understand is key to hearing the one important solo, and that its beauty can only really be experienced through empathy” (Kowalska 6). The beauty of Sonny’s solo is that he is finally able to communicate to his brother. The narrator is finally able to understand that Sonny is talking to him through his music, that music is Sonny’s language. Charles Duncan state ‘Sonny’s Blues’ works to open the *world-deafened* ears of potential listeners, including the narrator and the reader” (Duncan 1).

## 4.4 Listening for silences

Silences and pauses create room for reflection. The short story contains many different forms of pauses or full stops. Some are physical pauses like spaces between paragraphs, while others are changes in moods or narration. One of these pauses is in the scene where the narrator must listen to a friend of his brother, who tells him about Sonny's first experience with drugs. "I couldn't bear to watch him" (Baldwin "Sonny" 24). The narrator cannot look at his brother's friend, because the story is too hard to listen to. Instead, he turns away to look at a barmaid and to listen to the music. The music is powerful and makes the ground underneath him shake, but the moment it stops, it is as if everything else stops as well. "The music stopped, the barmaid paused and watched the juke box until the music began again" (Baldwin "Sonny" 24). The minute the music starts again, so does the conversation. The pause creates a break between the intense emotions the narrator is feeling, and the agonising truth that the narrator can't bear to hear. The truth is that Sonny's friend feels guilty for telling Sonny that heroin felt great. "I told him it felt great" (Baldwin "Sonny" 24). The feeling of being responsible for Sonny's drug addiction makes the narrator perceive the friend differently. In the declaration, the narrator understands that the friend has empathy with his brother. The revelation makes it possible for the narrator to respect the friend and he becomes human.

The first physical pause is a physical space in the text. This pause emphasises and creates a space to reflect on what just happened. The narrator has just listened to the story of Sonny's friend and they have left each other with a polite "Be seeing you" (Baldwin "Sonny" 25). This break invites the reader to reflect on the interaction between the two characters. The two characters are opposites. One of them, the narrator, is a man who has made it out of the low ceilings of Harlem. The other one is a man still submerged deep within this atmosphere. Throughout the interaction, the narrator goes through many emotions because he is talking to a man who has the same fate as his brother. Faced with a man of the same fate, the narrator feels disgust or hatred towards him. "I couldn't stand the way he looked at me, partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child" (Baldwin "Sonny" 23). The narrator describes the man with words that diminish the person to the level of an animal. The man is like a stray dog, dirty and inhuman. Parallel to this, the man is a drug addict, suffering the same fate as his brother. By aligning the two characterisations, Baldwin displays a typical reaction to drug addicts, whom people often shy away from in disgust. In doing so, both the reader and the narrator are temporarily allowed to treat the man without compassion. Throughout the interaction, something happens to the narrator. By the end of the section, the narrator cannot hate him

anymore. After talking to him for a while, he cannot see him as just a dog or cunning child. This is because the narrator has spent time listening to his story, thus getting to know him better. In doing so, the character becomes more than a friend of his brother and a drug addict, he becomes an acquaintance of the narrator as well. In other words, through the interaction, the narrator is able to see that Sonny's friend is similar to himself. Listening to Sonny's friend's story has helped the narrator recognise their similarities (Kidd and Castano 377). The person he has been talking to could have been, and in some sense is, his brother: "I didn't hate him any more" (Baldwin "Sonny" 25). Likewise, the reader is invited to reflect on the transformation in feeling towards the character. By creating a space, Baldwin leaves room for the reader to think: *Could it have been someone I know?* In doing so, he brings awareness to how humans tend to empathise more with people to whom they are similar than those to whom they are not.

Silences in "Sonny's Blues" are deafening cries to listen. The reader is not just meant to listen to the story narrated about the narrator's relationship to his brother, or to the story about a drug addict. He or she also meant to listen to and understand people he or she might meet in real life who resemble those in the short story. Charles Duncan, using quotes from Baldwin's book *Notes of a Native Son*, argues: "In his fiction, Baldwin appoints Sonny to tell that story, to overcome what the author calls 'the dangerous and reverberating silence' which is the 'inevitable result of things unsaid'" (Duncan 1). By using silence, Baldwin draws lines between the silenced voices in society and the silenced words between the two brothers. The silences present in the short story are deafening and immensely loud. In a moment of pause, the reader can imagine being in the silence of subway car: the car is at once silent as well as immensely loud. He or she is also able to imagine the silence heard by the narrator's wife, when the narrator's daughter Grace dies. "And, this time, Gracie was quiet. Yet, Isabel says that when she heard that *thump* and then that silence, something happened to her to make her afraid" (Baldwin "Sonny" 36). Grace dies because she cannot call for help. Her voice has been silenced as she gasps for air. Sonny's silence is very loud when he lives with his brother's family and stops playing the piano. After having moved in with their family, he starts playing the piano to pursue his dream of becoming a musician. When he finally stops playing, it becomes silent and he leaves the family. "The silence of the next few days must have been louder than the sound of all the music ever played since time began" (Baldwin "Sonny" 35). Silence becomes a harsh contrast to the sound of Sonny's music. Sonny's music is also his voice and way of communicating with the world. Therefore, the silences cry out to

be heard as it is comparable with the silenced voices of people who are not understood, seen or heard in the real world.

Sonny's silence also functions as a pause, as he waits for his brother to listen to him. His brother does not listen to Sonny and is therefore unable to help him. "I realized, with this mocking look, that there stood between us, forever, beyond the power of time or forgiveness, the fact that I had held silence – so long! – when he had needed human speech to help him" (Baldwin "Sonny" 39). The only thing that can help Sonny is that his brother understands him. That his brother finally does, enable the brother to narrate Sonny's story. It is as if Baldwin wants the reader to experience empathy for Sonny, even if the narrative is not narrated by Sonny. As if he is saying that some people do not have the chance to tell their story, which leads them to not be ignored. Similarly, in "Notes of a Native Son" Baldwin is the voice of the people living in Harlem. As the narrator moves through the streets of Harlem, groups of people have gathered but they say nothing. "There was certainly, on the other hand, occurring between them communication extraordinarily intense" (Baldwin "Notes" 101). This intense communication happens between people in Harlem of all social groups. The African American ghetto was at a standstill, as it would be silent before a storm. The silence between these people is as if to say that they all know something that they do not have to express: "something heavy in their stance seemed to indicate that they had all, incredibly, seen a common vision, and on each face there seemed to be the same strange, bitter shadow" (Baldwin "Notes" 102). It is an image of standing together in silence, agreeing, preparing for what is to come. Baldwin is preparing for his father to pass away, the people of Harlem are preparing for a race riot, and Sonny is preparing to come back into society after his drug addiction. All these people need a voice because they all have a story to tell. Their silence urges the reader to ask for their story, to wonder about it and to finally listen to it.

The notion of silence can denote a weakness, as well as strength in both "Sonny's Blues" and "Notes of a Native Son." Looking back, the author recalls himself using silence as a technique when he argued with his father. "Then I remembered our fights, fights which had been of the worst possible kind because my technique had been silence" (Baldwin "Notes" 109). He does not go any further to explain why it was the worst possible kind of fight, but you could suggest that it was terrible because of several things. What is important here is the inability to communicate with each other. It could also be that he was not able to stand up for himself in a confrontation. Similarly, Sonny removes himself from situations where he has to stand up for himself. He does this by becoming silent. "The silence of the

next few days must have been louder than the sound of all the music ever played since time began” (Baldwin “Sonny” 35). Sonny’s silence was intensified because up until the confrontation, he had been the opposite of silent, even if he had communicated through music, not words. In both of these cases, silence is a sort of reaction to something difficult, like a confrontation or a fight. It is as if to say that the two characters, Sonny and the author of “Notes of a Native Son”, are left silent because they do not have the words to stand up to the force they are met with. In the two texts, they are both faced with something they fear. Sonny is faced with being told to stop playing, which is equivalent to asking him to stop expressing himself. The author is faced with the strength of his own father, who frightened him, as well as his brothers and sisters. Since both Sonny and Baldwin are faced with racism and oppression, their silence could therefore be seen as a silent protest, a protest that would not lead anywhere because it ends all forms of communication. On the opposite side, this silence could be a symbol of how African Americans are silenced. In “Everybody’s Protest Novel”, Baldwin argues that the black man has to behave in a way that is agreeable to the white man. “He has to be; he is black; only through his forbearance can he survive or triumph” (Baldwin “Notes” 17). Being forbearing denotes that a person is patient. Perhaps he waits until spoken to, steps aside and allows for others to come first. In this context, it is the white American, stepping over the African American. A description of the latter form of silence, is found in “Notes of a Native Son”, where Baldwin describes the event leading up to his father’s death, and the race riot in Harlem.

Perhaps the most revealing news item, out of the steady parade of reports of muggings, stabbings, shootings, assaults, gang wars and accusations of police brutality, is the item concerning six Negro girls who set upon a white girl in the subway because, as they all too accurately put it, she was stepping on their toes. Indeed she was, all over the nation (Baldwin “Notes” 101)

Following the trace of silences, through “Notes of a Native Son” to “Sonny’s Blues” it becomes apparent that this silence is not a silence of agreement. Silence is a protest, or a stance towards a difficulty that African Americans seem unable to fight. The six *negro girls* who attacked a woman become the physical but silent protest toward the same evil. African Americans are a group of people who have been suppressed and segregated, who are struggling to find the words to express themselves, or words that might help them out of the black hole that society has created for them. The reader of both the story and the essay, may notice the resemblance to America today, and understand that the cruelty a whole people has faced is

still going on today. Therefore, a reader might draw on their own experiences through news reports and other similar stories, and therefore experience empathy toward both the fictional character and the group that they represent in the real world.

## 4.5 From Sympathy to Empathy

The shift from alienation to identification in the interaction between the narrator and Sonny's friend invites the reader to reflect on their own thoughts and behaviour towards those who are less fortunate, such as drug addicts and homeless people. By reconnecting with his brother, allowing himself to feel for him again, the narrator starts to be able to see him as a person. "He looked very unlike my baby brother. Yet, when he smiled, when we shook hands, the baby brother I'd never known looked out from the depths of his private life, like an animal waiting to be coaxed into the light" (Baldwin "Sonny" 26). Opposite to the use of the animal metaphor regarding Sonny's friend, the animal we are now introduced to is one that pleads to be cared for. What has changed is that the narrator is able to see his brother, not the drug addict. The encounter between Sonny's friend and the narrator is a symbol of the differences between people and how people react according to which group they belong to. As mentioned earlier, human beings tend to feel more towards people they consider part of their own group, in contrast to those whom they do not. When the narrator first reads the paper, he feels surprised, forced to feel something he has long subdued and hidden away. In contrast, the immediate reaction of Sonny's friend is guilt: "when I saw the papers this morning, the first thing I asked myself was if I had anything to do with it. I felt sort of responsible" (Baldwin "Sonny" 23-4). The friend also suffers from drug addiction, and you would expect him to understand Sonny because of it. By contrasting these two characters, you are forced to ask yourself why. Why does the brother not feel responsible?

Similarities between the two brothers are eventually what enable the narrator to understand his younger brother. The similarities they have are their personal problems. "I was sitting in the living room in the dark, by myself, and I suddenly thought of Sonny. My trouble made his real" (Baldwin "Sonny" 36). One of Sonny's problems is his drug addiction. The narrator's problem is the death of his daughter. The death of his daughter enables him to understand the pain and suffering of others. "Quite literally, the loss of Grace also enables her father to empathise with and explore the emptiness and aches of others" (Kowalska 2). The suffering does not have to be the same for another to be able to understand others' suffering.

By imposing this comparison, Baldwin asks the reader to consider how their own suffering can help them understand the suffering of others. In doing so, he assists the reader to identify with his characters.

Negative feelings are the more prominent than positive ones in “Sonny’s Blues.” “Not all feeling states of characters evoke empathy; indeed, empathetic responses to fictional characters and situations occur more readily for negative emotions” (Keen xii). The short story deals with negative feelings like the pain caused by a death in the family or drug addiction. On the faces of all the people on the subway, and on his own face, the narrator sees the story of heroin. The narrator imagines that what they all have in common is knowing someone whom they have lost to substance abuse. “I didn’t want to believe that I’d ever see my brother going down, coming to nothing, all that light in his face gone out, in the condition I’d already seen so many others” (Baldwin “Sonny” 22). Drug addiction is something that can affect people in all walks of life, both poor, rich, black, white, American, Norwegian. Unfortunately, though, it often affects poor people as drug addiction is often linked with poverty. In the faces of himself and others, he could see the effect of watching a light go out.

A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. It was a special kind of ice. It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins, but it never got less. (Baldwin “Sonny” 21)

The narrator is experiencing a bodily reaction to the story he has read, a bodily reaction to imagining the pain, and the physical pain of imagining the drug that has taken over the body of someone he cares about. The cold ice that melts and runs through his veins is like the heroin being melted, shot through the veins of his brother. As Keen (xx) mentions, fleeting empathetic responses or sensations are normal in human beings, and even primates. She also argues that these sensations often do not stay over time, they are fleeting. However, the narrator’s emotional reaction is slow, and not a short lived, quick response to another person’s suffering. It stays with him throughout the day, as the ice keeps melting, sending shivers through him.

## 5 Conclusion

Based on the idea that reading has beneficial effects on the reader, this thesis wanted to investigate empathy in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." To do this, this thesis discussed the importance of bringing emotions back into the study of literature. In addition to this, this thesis introduced a history of the term 'empathy'. The definition of empathy used in this thesis is that empathy is an emotional response to someone's emotional state or condition. This emotional response stems from an understanding of someone's emotional state. Being able to understand other is therefore an important notion in this thesis. This thesis also discussed the popular idea that reading improves a reader's ability for empathy. Since this is difficult to prove in a study like this one, this thesis wanted to look closer at sections in "Sonny's Blues" that invites empathy in the reader. This thesis has shown how Baldwin's narrative techniques, use of symbolism and his focus on characters that bare resemblance to real life people, begs of the reader to have an empathetic reaction to his short story. In relation to Baldwin's essay "Notes of a Native Son", this thesis has tried to show that Baldwin's builds bridges between his fictional characters and his real ones. This ultimately invites the reader to empathise with real life representations of Baldwin's characters. This thesis has looked closer at the naming of the characters hoping to make the argument that Sonny could be anybody's son. This is because Baldwin's story reaches people outside his identity group, and because people tend to empathise more with people that are like themselves. By looking closer at the motif of music and silences, this thesis has tried to show the immense power in Baldwin's silences. They function as loud cries for people to listen to his stories, and to the stories of other less fortunate people in society. "Sonny's Blues" is also a story about drug addiction, and how it is a reaction to or a result of living in a place like Harlem. Harlem, it is argued, becomes a symbol of colour and the characters inability to escape either. These topics, it is argued, readers might be able to identify with, as they are not bound to gender, place, time, culture or ethnicity.

This thesis suggests that James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" has the potential to reach many readers, to teach them about the lives of the people of Harlem, about compassion and listening to people's stories. We can only propose that this short story will produce empathy in the reader, because it so often begs for it. Maybe it does not matter if everyone is affected by or managed to listen to his story or not. Perhaps there is an implied reader, one who knows of the struggle of people in Harlem. This could be people in Harlem, New York, United States, black or white. Perhaps it could be people who have a brother they have not talked to,



someone who has experienced loss in their life. Perhaps the implied reader is one across the ocean and far from Harlem, but one who has first-hand experience with the devastating effects of drug abuse. Perhaps none of the above. Perhaps the implied reader is one who has neither a brother, never experienced loss, or known anyone with a drug addiction. Perhaps the story is written for them, to open their eyes, assuming they will look at that addict once more, to look for their story in their faces, to listen. Perhaps it is for all of us, to let us look for similarities, big or small, between ourselves and the two brothers. Perhaps “Sonny’s Blues” is Baldwin’s blues, that he desperately tries to make us understand and listen to.

James Baldwin’s narratives has the ability to reach readers across both time and national borders. He provides insight to a people and their suffering that to this day is still very much alive. Therefore, using his literature in a teaching situation, could be very useful. It could give students an insight they might not otherwise have had about the life in the US and the lives of African Americans. Perhaps students would be able to understand the suffering of people today, based on the history of violence and segregation in one of the world’s biggest countries. As this thesis has tried to show, Baldwin’s fiction is begging of the reader to understand that everybody has a story to tell. Reading these stories might affect readers and lead them to feel empathy for a fictional character. What Baldwin’s fiction in relation to his essay does, is create a bridge between fiction and real-life events. This connection is what becomes important if we were to do a study on why empathy in literature is important and how to teach this in a classroom. If Baldwin’s fiction creates empathy in the reader, does this result in readers feeling empathy towards the real-life representatives of his characters? If so, “Sonny’s Blues” could be taught in school, in hope that students would feel empathy for a group of people that has endured so many years of injustice? As this thesis has argued, Baldwin’s narrative asks for the reader to feel empathy for the character. What would be an interesting further study is whether or not this empathy could be translated into the real world, and whether or not empathy produced through reading could be scientifically proven.

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