Introduction

James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” frequently anthologized and arguably the most well-known of the writer’s short stories, was first published in 1957, when the Civil Rights Movement was making progress. The story deals with the conflict between the unnamed narrator, an African-American high school mathematics teacher who has made a social ascent to the middle class and his younger brother Sonny, an aspiring jazz pianist with a criminal record of using and peddling drugs, and with their reconciliation; their understanding of each other is based on the power of the music Sonny plays at the climactic ending of the story. James Darsey, for example, says that “Baldwin’s portrait of Sonny playing at the club while his brother watches and listens is a beautiful statement of the artist as a poet, the power of 
poietes — the ability to create out of itself, to take the chaos of the world into the self and represent it as universal narrative” (200; italics original, underlines added).

This ending of the story, however, remains ambiguous: first, the reader cannot literally “listen to” the music in a text that consists of words; second, the narrator is initially portrayed as a respectable person with poor understanding of, and little interest in, music, which makes his judgment on the quality of the blues his brother plays appear rather unreliable in the narrative.

The problem regarding the difference of media of expression (i.e., of the characteristics of literature and music) seems so far to have been overlooked: Sonny is a pianist, not literally a “poet” as Darsey says, not even a singer who
sings a song composed of words, and, while literature is a semantic medium that
discursively represents some aspect of the world we live in, music is, except for
its lyrics, primarily auditory.

Walter Pater famously stated that “[a]ll art aspires toward the conditions of
music” (86; in the original this axiom is italicized), meaning that “in all other
kinds of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from form, and understanding
can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it”
(86). It is hard in a literary text to reproduce the meanings and implications of
Sonny’s music, what Pater calls “the matter”; it is inseparable from what the
English critic calls “form” in music, including the blues the jazz pianist plays at
the end of the story. That is to say, literature is not so “pure” as music, according
to Pater’s axiom.²

On the other hand, there is a problem of stereotyping. The ending seems to
imply that playing blues and accepting “suffering” as Sonny does is more
appropriate for an African-American than living a respectable and secure middle-
class life as the narrator does;³ D. Quentin Miller says that “[b]y the middle of the
twentieth century, when Baldwin was in the process of becoming the most
prominent African American writer of his time, jazz and the blues were receiving
unprecedented critical acclaim and attention” (85) and that “jazz and the blues . . .
provide a metaphor for African American liberation” (85). In literature and
criticism, especially in the sixties, middle-class life was frequently considered
synonymous with mediocrity and selfish indifference to social injustices.
Regarding the narrator’s social standing merely as a sign of conformism, or
Uncle-Tomism, however, can practically mean containment of ethnic minorities
within a secluded domain. Such a position would be reassuring to racists, either
undisguised or covert, uncomfortable with non-whites claiming for and enjoying
the same rights as those of the whites.

In addition, the stability of the middle-class life in the United States, in Japan,
and in Europe has changed in our present neo-liberalist environment, and its significance needs to be reconsidered. The narrator’s father grunts “Safe, hell! Ain’t no place safe for kinds, nor nobody” “whenever [the narrator’s mother] suggest[s] trying to move to a neighborhood which might be safer for children” (840). Although the narrator personally makes social ascent to the middle class and procures safety, as his mother should have wanted, its precariousness is insinuated by the deaths of the narrator’s uncle and daughter (842-44, 852) as well as by his brother’s arrest. The narrator’s father’s pessimism seems premonitory in view of the threatened safety of today’s middle class, not only in the United States but also in Japan and in Europe.

Recently, interests in Baldwin’s works and their significance are growing in view of today’s social contexts; police brutalities, on one hand, were exposed and protested against in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland respectively in 2014 and 2015. On the other, unabashed racism is dividing the society, as we can see in the spread of Trumpism in the United States and its counterparts both in Japan and in Europe. There is the majority’s morbid fear of ethnic minorities inflated by the stereotypical image of them, as well as misguided nostalgia for the fictitious “good old days,” no matter whether it may be the consumer society of the nineteen fifties or the “Wild West” of the “pioneering” days. Both are primarily artifacts of our popular/mass culture distributed through the media; anxieties of the middle class, especially of the white lower middle class, is certainly behind these socio-political tendencies.

Miller in his essay extensively deals with Baldwin’s continuing interest in and commitment to music throughout his career. In this essay, I will instead concentrate on the text and the narrative structure of “Sonny’s Blues,” anticipating that this text-oriented and formalistic methodology will complement Miller’s “author”-oriented approach and make it possible to understand how the literary text, discursive in its character, works with the “music,” represented in it but
incongruous with the language’s semantic aspect, and how the latter makes use of and manifests the medium’s characteristics.

1. Disrespect for Louis Armstrong and the Problem of Mass Culture

When the narrator asks the protagonist what kind of musician he wants to be, Sonny praises Charlie Parker and denounces Louis Armstrong:

“What do you want to do?” I asked him.

. . .

. . . “I want to play jazz,” he said.

. . . I simply couldn’t see why on earth he’d want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs, clowning around on bandstands, while people pushed each other around a dance floor. It seemed — beneath him, somehow. . . . I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called “good-time people.”

. . .

I suggested, helpfully: “You mean — like Louis Armstrong?”

His face closed as though I’d struck him. “No. I’m not talking about none of that old-time, down home crap.”

“. . . Name somebody — you know, a jazz musician you admire.”

“Bird.”

“Who?”

“Bird! Charlie Parker! Don’t they teach you nothing in the goddamn army?”

. . . “. . . Who’s this Parker character?”

“He’s just one of the greatest jazz musicians alive,” said Sonny, sullenly,
his hands in his pockets, his back to me. “Maybe the greatest,” he added, bitterly, “that’s probably why you never heard of him.” (845-47; italics original, underlines added).

Sonny’s judgment of them as musicians, however, is hardly self-evident: both of them are important figures in the history of jazz in their own ways, and, while we can agree with his high opinion of Charlie Parker, some would wonder why Louis Armstrong had to be treated in such a disrespectful way. Both of them are real people, and we can listen to their music and make our own judgment. What matters in reading the text, however, is not our own judgment of each musician but to understand why the fictional jazz pianist regards them that way.

It is hard to determine whether the judgment is that of the “author” or of the fictional musician. To make the latter’s judgment convincing to the reader, Sonny has to be a good musician; in the text, his talent in music seems demonstrated in the last scene (861-64), in which he plays his “blues” (863) and the narrator is impressed by his younger brother’s performance. The narrator, however, is not a reliable judge of his younger brother’s talent in music: he is ill informed about jazz and, being the elder brother, he is an interested party, too close to the musician to be impartial, which can be said about the other members of the band and the audience, both of whom are Sonny’s friends. From a textual perspective, the reader is inclined to take it for granted that he successfully played the last number and deservedly impressed his obstinate elder brother just because the scene is at the end of the story; in a narrative the ending usually functions as a conclusion, in which the implications of a story are determined.7

Judging from Sonny’s reference to Louis Armstrong’s music as “that old-time, down home crap” (846), his negative opinion of Satchmo may be based on his and/or his creator’s criticism of the rather stereotypical character he played in the movie High Society, released one year prior to the story’s first publication. It
is easy by today’s standards to criticize the stereotyped character he played in the film, but an African-American artists’ position was weaker than today; we can regard the role he played as a strategical compromise to survive as a musician and celebrity in mid-fifties American society and continue to influence the public through his music. Probably Sonny did not approve of the compromise because he was still young and “innocent” in spite of his brother’s opinion of how young African-Americans in Harlem grew up (831).

Another possible reading of Sonny’s judgment is that he has in his mind the contemporary changes in the history of jazz the music was undergoing in the forties and fifties: Radiclani Clytus points out that Baldwin’s “coming of age coincided with one of the most dynamic transitions in American music, as the big band and swing gave way to the intense small combo arrangements of modern jazz and bebop” (71). While Louis Armstrong’s style belongs to “traditional” jazz, Parker is among the experimental jazz musicians and is considered a major figure in bebop. When Sonny’s opinion is interpreted this way, his idea of jazz is, first, strangely similar to those of his seemingly conservative father, who has denounced jazz musicians as “good-time people” (846), and of his elder brother, who says that “[i]t seemed . . . beneath him” (846), having put jazz players in the same category his father did. Though the brothers are confronting each other over whether he should become a jazz musician or not, they have similar views of “conventional” jazz such as swing, prevalent when they were children and their father was still alive, and which German philosopher and music critic Theodor W. Adorno repeatedly condemned as a mere accompaniment to dancing (“On the Fetish Character” 49; “The Schema of Mass Culture” 87).

These two possible interpretations are interrelated: the stereotyped representation of an African-American jazz player in a movie concerns what Adorno calls the “cultural industry,” in which “details of cultural works such as movies are “ready-made clichés, to be used here and there as desired and always completely defined
by the purpose they serve within the schema,” whose “sole raison d’être” is “[t]o confirm the [ready-made] schema by acting as its constituents” (Horkheimer and Adorno 98; italics original). Sonny’s negative opinion of the “conventional” jazz, to which Adorno repeated refers as a typical product of the “cultural industry,” is a politico-cultural act of criticizing such “ready-made clichés,” although Adorno himself hardly attributed such potential to jazz. Sonny’s criticism of “traditional” jazz, then, leads to that of the contemporary popular or mass culture as a whole.

The following section is devoted to a discussion of the kind of music Sonny is pursuing.

2. Jazz, the “Dialogic,” and the Masses

Before the narrator goes to the night club and listens to his younger brother play jazz or blues, they have an argument over suffering, which seems inspired by the brothers looking at and listening to a revival meeting:

. . . Suddenly I was standing still in front of the living room window, watching Seventh Avenue. . . .

On the sidewalk across from me, near the entrance to a barbecue joint, some people were holding an old-fashioned revival meeting. The barbecue cook . . . , his conked hair reddish and metallic in the pale sun . . . , stood in the doorway, watching them. . . . Well, they [kids, older people, a couple of very tough-looking women] were watching this, too. The revival was being carried on by three sisters in black, and a brother. All they had were their voices and their Bibles and a tambourine. Then she raised both hands, striking the tambourine against the air, and then against one hand, and she started to sing. And the two other sisters and
the brother joined in.

It was strange, suddenly, to watch, though I had been seeing these meetings all my life. So, of course, had everybody else down there. Yet, they paused and watched and listened and I stood still at the window. “‘Tis the old ship of Zion,” they sang . . . “it has rescued many a thousand!” Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for the first time, not one of them had been rescued. . . . Neither did they especially believe in the holiness of the three sisters and the brother, they knew too much about them, knew where they lived, and how. . . . A man fumbled in his pockets for change and stood holding it in his hand impatiently . . . Then I saw Sonny, standing on the edge of the crowd. . . . Then the singing stopped, the tambourine turned into a collection plate again. The furious man dropped in his coins and vanished, so did a couple of the women, and Sonny dropped some change in the plate, looking directly at the woman with a little smile. He started across the avenue, toward the house. . . .

. . . I stayed at the window, both relieved and apprehensive. As Sonny disappeared from my sight, they began singing again. . . .

. . . But he [Sonny] came up to the window and stood beside me, looking out. “What a warm voice,” he said.

They were singing If I could only hear my mother pray again!

“Yes,” I said, “and she can sure beat that tambourine.”

“But what a terrible song,” he said, and laughed. . . . (852-55, italics original, underlines added)

Ethnicity of the members of the meeting is not clearly stated in the text, but the narrator remarks that the people listening to them, including the narrator himself,
have intimately known them for a long time, and that the barbecue cook has “conked hair,” which implies that he is an African-American trying to conform to the mainstream culture of the United States at that time; these details suggest that they are also African-Americans.

The songs are gospels, and this also implies the same about their ethnicity. Three gospels are presented in the text, of which the first two are quoted above, the other being “Till We Meet Again” (855). After listening to the first gospel, Sonny remarks that the voice is impressively warm while the song (i.e., the lyrics signifying religious “contents”) is terrible: here he is, according to Pater’s schema referred to in the introduction, separating the “matter” and the “form” of the gospels, so as to make the gospel’s form, irreducible to discursive meanings, invulnerable to attempts to “interpret” it with clichés. These remarks show that, first, he considers the melody/form of music to be separable from words/meanings so as to save the former from the clichés of the latter and that, second, he has a basically positive opinion of the gospels, which belong to an old form of African-American music, although he himself plays music of a modern style.

The gospel is an old genre closely related with the spiritual, in which the song’s words have double meanings: in “Go Down, Moses,” for example, the words describe Biblical events in Exodus but also signify hardships of the slaves in the American plantation society and doomed fate of the oppressors, equating Pharaoh with slave-owning planters of the U. S. South (“Go Down, Moses”). The latter genre requires “proper” listeners to be “critical,” i.e., not to accept the lyrics at their face value but to “de-code” it. In other words, the listener is expected to take part in the attempt to outwit their oppressors’ censorship.

When Sonny mostly talks positively about the gospel, he implicitly suggests that the lyrics both of the spiritual and the gospel have a similar characteristic: in either genre lyrics are not to be taken literally, for the oppressed cannot be, or allowed to be, so articulate. The listener, therefore, is obliged to take the words of
the song not at their face value;\(^{10}\) Sonny tolerates the “terrible song” and appreciates the “warm voice.” In either genre, the listener has to exercise his or her critical judgment in order to appreciate the music appropriately.

The aspiring pianist’s critical appreciation of the gospels here, oddly, seems to be in the line of what Adorno, Horkheimer, and other thinkers of the Frankfurt School expect a decent person to do when he or she appreciates a work of art, despite the school’s sometimes élitist and negative attitude toward mass/popular culture. Sonny’s attitude toward music, in contrast, is far from élitist. Gospel does not belong to the cultural mainstream and is not usually regarded as “high culture,” and the revival meeting in the American socio-cultural context belongs to an anti-élite cultural movement, though it can sometimes be complicit with populism. He seems to anticipate that the cultural continuity between gospel and his own art can provide the listener with an antithesis to uncritical reception of music prevalent in a consumer society, at the time when jazz was becoming a part of “high culture.”

After listening to the gospels, hearing his younger brother’s opinion of them, and then arguing about “suffering” (852-59), the narrator goes to the nightclub where Sonny is going to play, and is introduced to an “enormous black man, much older than Sonny or [him]self” (859) called Creole.\(^{11}\) This man appears to be the leader of the band. He then meets other members of the band and his brother’s friends, most of whom have come to listen to Sonny play (859-60). When he is installed at a table by Creole and the music begins, he remarks in his interior monologue that “[a]ll [he] know[s] about music is that not many people ever really hear it” (861). Miller says that “[t]he narrator is clearly a flawed character, whose chief flaw is his inability to listen” (99; underline added), but the narrator’s interior monologue here rather suggests his dissatisfaction with the way people listen to music.

The remark corresponds with the view of jazz as the Frankfurt School
understands it: it does not deserve attentive listening because it only “confirm[s] the [ready-made] schema” (Horkheimer and Adorno 98) and because in it “all the moments which succeed one another in time are . . . interchangeable with one another” and “there is no development” and “what comes later is not . . . richer in experience than what has preceded it” (Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture” 71). The narrator feels dissatisfied with the way people perceive music not as what it really is but, instead, as something they assume it should be, according to some fixed idea. Such discontent, probably fostered through his interactions with his brother, should be new to him.

The narrator’s irritation concerns the reception of music and art, and by extension contemporary literary theories on how literature and art in general are “produced” and received/consumed in modern society. It is a fundamental criterion of contemporary literary criticism, originating almost simultaneously but in practice separately from Russian Formalism and New Criticism in the early twentieth century, that appreciation, reception, and criticism of literature and art in general should be based foremost on what is actually present in the piece of art, such as words in the text, instead of what is associated with it and what surround it and its creator. Adorno refers to the latter tendency among enthusiastic jazz listeners when he denounces the genre (“On the Fetish Characters” 52-53); Walter Benjamin also criticizes similar tendency of moviegoers, saying “[t]he cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity” (231), and in the same essay he points out that “the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectators” (239; underline added). Although the two thinkers deal with different media and we as readers are referring to still another medium—the literary text—the point of the argument applies to all of them in common: people seldom pay enough attention to the piece of art itself which he or she is meant to be appreciating.
The episode of Sonny practicing the piano at the narrator’s future wife Isabel’s parents’ house, inserted in the middle of the story, illustrates how jazz demands concentration of the listeners (849-50): Isabel’s family are forced to listen to Sonny play their piano, not allowed to exercise the consumer’s “right” of “free choice.” The piano is a symbolic apparatus for proving the family’s cultural sophistication, and for them the way Sonny plays the piano is too furious to stand (849-51), and he is, at this stage of his development and at this stage of the story, in the line of the nineteenth-century Romantic artist, who, with his “overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth 598), is considered and/or expected to be subversive to middle-class respectability. While the arguments of Adorno and Benjamin can also be construed as a critique of the family’s bourgeois “consumption” of art, the way Sonny plays jazz deconstructs the dichotomy of “high art” and “mass culture,” an assumption at the basis of Adorno’s aesthetics.

When he denounces jazz, Adorno may primarily have the radio and the record player, which can be turned on and off at a consumers’ will; a live performance and/or practice cannot be shut off, due to the characteristic of sound which penetrates into one’s privacy. Miller, on the other hand, points out the significance of the “mechanical detachment between audience and artist” made possible by “recording and radio” (86) and compares the “distinction between recorded and live music” to “Baldwin’s multiple roles” of “writing in private” and “speaking and lecturing to live audiences” (86-87). The text of “Sonny’s Blues” primarily deals with live performances, and records are only briefly mentioned.

At the end of the story, as if to correspond to the narrator’s newly acquired view of the music and art in general, the band’s music invites people to be actively involved in the appreciation of art, including listeners of the live music. The narrator has been introduced to the band leader, his brother’s fellow musicians, and his friends who presumably frequent the club and connoisseurs of jazz/blues. He is no longer an anonymous listener-consumer of the music, and, although he
does not say anything explicit about what he makes of this situation in the text itself, it is natural to surmise that he should be aware of his position as a participant of the performance there; he is being seen as he sees and listens to the band play blues, and he is “responsible” to the performance.

Judging from the exchanges before the band begins to play the first number (859-60), the day’s performances seem to have been planned for Sonny’s comeback, and not only the members of the band but most of the audience seem to be aware of it. He “[hasn’t] been near a piano for over a year,” “[isn’t] on much better terms with his life, not the life that stretched before him” (861-62), and cannot play the piano well, which presumably Creole and the other members, and presumably most of the audience, expected. That is to say, the last scene is not that of a talented musician playing splendid music and proving the legitimacy and significance of his efforts and of African-American music; the scene, instead, portrays his friends who know him and his music trying to work with him so that he might be able to play his blues and come to terms in some way with his life stretching before him. Their “listening” is a collaborative act of working with him to deal with his and their collective life through music.

The first attempt is hardly successful: “He and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped . . . then seemed to have found a direction, panicked again, got stuck” (862), and, when they finished playing, “there was scattered applause” (862). The failure in the first number suggests that, at this stage of the story, he is portrayed as something other than a Romantic genius who mysteriously solves problems of life with the power of his art. The audience, however, give him another chance, and their attitude implies that they are not “consumers” of music; the audience’s tolerance proves that what music means for them is in contrast with Adorno’s idea of “mass culture” in general and jazz in particular: “[m]ass culture demonstrates its connection with the prevailing practice . . . by borrowing industrial methods . . . . . The perfection of technical ‘how’
The virtuosity of the jazz band which abandons itself to the eight-bar rhythms of the hit composer like a wild animal in a cage . . . .” (“The Schema of Mass Culture” 79). There naturally should be a composer, but their band’s performance, as is often the case with jazz, largely consists of the members’ “improvisations,” as the way of playing is called in jazz. In the kind of jazz that Sonny and his fellow musicians play, a number’s composer is not the equivalent of what in literature is called the “author,” someone who controls his or her “work” with “authority,” in the terminology proposed by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault.

In the next number “Am I Blue” (862; original in italics, without a question mark at the end of the title), “[s]omething beg[ins] to happen” (862). The number, written in 1929, was originally a song Ethel Waters sung in the movie *On with the Show!* but has become a standard and consequently been covered by a lot of musicians during the period in which styles of popular music were undergoing drastic changes (“Am I Blue?”). As far as I could gather from the several versions I listened to, the song cannot be arranged into the melody so fierce as the music Sonny should have been playing on the piano at Isabel’s parents’ house, and its lyrics do not have a controversial message, in the way “Strange Fruit,” sung by Billie Holliday, does. The source of the power of their live performance is only available to the audience present in the time-space created by language; tantalizingly, the reader can only infer how it affects the listeners from the fragments of information in the text. Suggestively, the vocal part is not represented in the text, which suggests that it may have been arranged into an instrumental version: its semantic aspect is eliminated in the text.

“Creole let[s] out the reins” in response to the change in Sonny’s performance; “[t]he low, black man sa[y]s something awful on the drums,” “Creole answer[s],” “the drums talk[s] back,” “the horn insist[s] . . .,” “Creole listen[s], commenting now and then . . .,” and “[t]hen they all c[ome] together again, and Sonny [is] part
of the family again” (862; underlines added). The young pianist makes a comeback, and Creole “fill[s] the air with the immense suggestion that Sonny speak for himself” (863). Their performance, seemingly a succession of improvisations, is described as a series of dialogues—not with words, but with sounds. From the start, during the unsuccessful first number, the title of which is not specified in the text, Creole “was having a dialogue with Sonny” (861; underline added) and “listened” (861). He is the leader of the band but not the conductor. Having accepted Creole’s “reins” (862) until then, Sonny and other musicians are portrayed as something other than solipsistic artists in the tradition of nineteenth-century Romanticism.

Their music’s dialogic nature has more to do with the antithesis of what Hannah Arendt calls “atomization” than with the Bakhtinian vision of utopia: “[s]ocial atomization and extreme individualism preceded the mass movements [by which she means Fascism] which . . . attracted the completely unorganized, the typical ‘nonjoiners’ who for individualistic reasons always had refused to recognize social links or obligations” (316-17; underlines added). Their music can be construed as an alternative to the culture of the atomized mass society; in contrast with Arendt’s view of contemporary society, their music evokes a collective memory of the oppressed, at least for the narrator’s mind, when Sonny dialogically plays his blues:

Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. . . . Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. . . . He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back . . . so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother’s face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on
must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father’s brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel’s tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. (863; underlines added)

After lamenting our general incapacity to listen to music (861), and by inference our failure to listen to others, the narrator says:

. . . on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours. (861; underlined added)

Music here, as the narrator understands it, is not a medium for self-expression, which has been regarded as a self-evident function of art in the modern bourgeois society under the influence of Romanticism since the late eighteenth century.

The narrator’s understanding of his brother’s band’s performance may be wrong at the level of objective evaluation, for he is an inexperienced listener. Yet his impression (i.e., how he has been affected by his brother’s “blues”) remains relevant to our understanding of what music, and by inference art in general, can do for today’s alienated and sometimes atomized individual’s mind.
3. Collective Experience and the Norm of Self-Responsibility

The text of the story represents not only modern jazz or blues Sonny and his fellow musicians play, which is dialogically performed and appreciated, and evoking a collective memory of the oppressed, but also gospels—an older form of African-American music, for which people make donations not based on its market value but according to their will (854). The gospels at the revival meeting remind the reader of sermons at African-American churches, and of the biographical fact that both the novelist’s stepfather and the young would-be novelist himself served in one as preachers. In a sermon delivered at African-American churches, its semantic content, which Pater calls the “matter,” and its wording and cadence that arouse emotions, which the art critic calls the “form,” often inseparably work together. In addition, people do not pay for the service as consumers but donate as a member of the church and of the community; in that sense, the act of donation is also a two-directional dialogic communication. Either at a revival meeting or at an African-American church, the audience is an integral part of the production of music or sermon, not anonymous, and therefore replaceable, “consumers” of the product of the cultural industry. As seen above, Arendt refers to such individuals as atomized constituents of the masses that cannot and/or refuse to recognize social links and obligations.

Both in African-American music like blues and gospels as represented in the text and in sermons at African-American churches in the novelist’s contemporary cultural heritage, there is a dialogic quality as opposed to the monologic and solipsistic assumption of the individualism of Western bourgeois society. This characteristic of African-American cultural context, in the story, is closely connected with the skepticism about the sense of security of middle-class life: the dialogic thinking does not allow either the fictitious musician or the writer who created him to exempt himself from the overall social hardships through individual
immunity, or an illusion of it, procured by some personal advantage. The narrator gradually begins to question his sense of security in the story while Sonny’s abuse of drugs, which seems to be his means of escape and relief from suffering, can also be regarded as a result of his almost excessive sense of links to, and ethical obligation as, an artist to the suffering fellow members of his ethnic group. They do not suffer or feel obliged to incur suffering because they are African-American, but rather their African-American socio-cultural context makes them more critical and skeptical about the sense of personal immunity from the hardships their fellow minorities are suffering.

The narrator’s relative sense of security is put into question, first by hearing about Sonny’s arrest, and, in his resulting mental confusion, he criticizes his colleague who, clinging to the illusion of personal immunity, does not even have compassion for his or her own students:

I stood up and walked over to the window and looked down into the courtyard. . . . A teacher passed through them every now and again, quickly, as though he or she couldn’t wait to get out of that courtyard, to get those boys out of their sight and off their minds. (832; underline added)

The narrator, critically looking down at his colleagues from the window, can be construed as a correlative of the reader: namely, an educated person who was fortunate enough to have grown up in a decent environment and had a chance to acquire a taste for books. As if to make up for such unintentional inattention to the socio-cultural privilege the majority of readers are born into, the narrator has become keener about the conditions of his students’ life, the kind of life he could have lived. With some luck and through his own merit and effort, he has individually made a fairly successful escape from such a condition, although he
has earned his own social status and security instead of inheriting them from his parents. He would usually have acted more or less like his colleagues in the quote above, content with his personal social ascent and with his seeming immunity from the hardships of the environment in which he himself has grown up; here he is suffering in lieu of the reader of the story, and at the same time maturing as an educator. An educator, especially one at public school, is obliged to confront the social inequalities that limit his or her students’ potential.

He has unknowingly begun to question his own middle-class privilege and suspend his sense of immunity. He then remembers, first, the tale his mother told him about drunken white men killing his and Sonny’s father’s brother for fun (842-44), which, perversely, had been kept secret from the brothers. Second, he recalls the unexpected and abrupt death of Grace, the narrator’s daughter (852); the bereavement is “absurd,” in the terminology of existentialist philosophers, with whom the novelist’s literary progenitor Richard Wright associated in his practical exile in France.16 The “absurdity” corresponds to the disrupted narrative structure of the main story that is supposed to embody the deterministic linear logic,17 in which it is assumed that everything has a cause and that, conversely, without a cause, nothing happens. The narrator should have assumed that by getting away from the environment of Harlem by his social ascent nothing serious was going to happen to his family, but his plan of security was overpowered by the absurdity of life.

Even before the two deaths are recalled in his consciousness, the process of his mental maturing has started and he has begun to have compassion for his fellow natives of Harlem. He engages in dialogue with his brother’s friend whom he himself has never liked (833), and even “[begins] to listen more carefully” (834). He probably would not begin to like him, but “listen[ing]” to the other’s view, dissimilar from his own, is what matters, and gives solace and leads to deeper insight: “All at once something inside gave and threatened to come pouring...
out of me. I didn’t hate him any more” (836). He “lends” him five dollars “[j]ust for a couple of days” (836), which he presumably knows he would not get back. The act, in this context, seems more like mutual support, reminiscent of the donation to the songs at the revival meeting. Such a situation can be regarded as an alternative to the consumerism in the American environment, where self-preservation is overemphasized as the sole principle of maintaining social order, disregarding fundamental inequalities beyond the reach of the efforts for self-preservation at the personal level. 18

It is significant that, when the narrator is becoming critical about his colleagues’ attitude toward their students in Harlem, he is looking down from a window, seeing them without being seen by them (832). The same structure is to be found in the scene in which he is looking down at and listening to the revival meeting (852-54), discussed above. While he is learning to doubt his individual immunity, he symbolically retains his vantage point in the text. In contrast, in the last scene where he listens to his brother play blues, he has lost the vantage point; he is listening to and seeing the band’s live performance while he is also being seen by people there.

The lack of attentiveness, which the narrator laments in the last scene, can, and often does, apply to how “cultural élites,” of which the narrator can be said to be a member, listens to, appreciates, or reads “high culture” today. Some of them “consume” it so as to show off what Pierre Bourdieu calls their cultural capital and justify their socio-cultural status; it is not exempt from uncritical and inattentive “consumption” in spite of Adorno’s optimistic expectations of its potential to counteract the atomized masses’ uncritical “consumption” of art, their inclination toward what Benjamin calls the authoritarian and totalitarian politics rendered aesthetic (Benjamin 242). It is not the genre or its status but how people produce, appreciate, and/or get involved in art that determines whether it is uncritically “consumed” or becomes a part of a higher level of critical or
contemplative thinking. Adorno, Benjamin, and Arendt have Fascism in view, but, in the American context, their arguments are also relevant to racist movements both in their unabashed and disguised forms.

Conclusion

We cannot be sure whether or not, how, or to what degree Sonny successfully played because there is an insurmountable difference of the characteristics between the different media, of music and a literary text. The people who are present in the scene and participating in the musicians’ “dialogic” performance, however, are portrayed as being impressed; the live music, which does not seem to have been recorded, is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and their impressions, especially that of the narrator, is what matters. There may be no “objective” judgment; we can only evaluate a performance like that through mind and/or memory, also semantically as represented in language.

While the title of the story bears the jazz musician’s name, placing him in the tradition of the “titular heroes/heroines” prevailing in nineteenth-century novels, the text is also a story of his elder brother, a member of the minority who has fortunately made a personal social ascent and has been content with his success and the resulting sense of immunity from hardships of life, according to the modern/American ideology of self-responsibility. In the story he learns that he and his family are also vulnerable, although the risk is lower than for those who were not as lucky as he was and could not escape from the harmful environment they were born into. “[T]he very cup of trembling” (864), a Biblical quote usually ascribed to the suffering musician, also pertains to the narrator himself: the music at the end of the text, the quality of which can only partially and incompletely be represented with words, stands for the process through which such an individual
in a divided society recovers or discovers the sense of social links and obligations, thus paradoxically gaining the standpoint of someone other than a mere constituent of the atomized masses.

When the narrator comes to the club to listen to his brother’s blues, he is among the kind of people alien to the environment he is accustomed to, in whom he would not have joined unless he had decided to listen to his brother play. Music here has once again penetrated into the complacently isolated privacy of an individual, albeit in a way different from the one depicted in the episode of Sonny practicing the piano at Isabel’s parents’ house (849-50), as observed in section two.

Such power, for which music is a correlative in the text, bears relevance to the political and socio-cultural situation today, when the Internet, once hopefully expected to be a medium through which everyone can express their views on equal terms, lets the atomized masses seclude themselves. This is what Eli Pariser calls the filter bubble, within which one is shut away from unpleasant information and can flock together only with people of similar views, entertaining the illusion of freedom from the conventional mass media oligopolized by élites. In such an environment the alt-right, as well as its Japanese counterpart neto-uyo (the Internet right, with pejorative connotations) unabashedly express their racist discourses which they would have hesitated to voice in a live milieu where one is obliged to meet various kinds of people in flesh and blood. The dialogic sphere is an alternative Baldwin proposes to the atomized masses in such a society divided who are caught in morbid fear of the changing society, where one cannot but share the world with heterogeneous others.
The story was first published in the summer issue of *Partisan Review* in 1957 and was then included in the collection *Going to Meet the Man* published by Dial Press in 1965 (“Note on the Texts” 965). The base text for this essay is that of the Library of America edition, which reproduces that of the first edition of the 1965 collection and is widely available, standardized for scholarly use, and reliable enough for the purpose of this study. Page references are shown in parentheses.

While I agree with the implication of Pater’s argument, I do not agree with him on the value judgment, in which he puts music above the other genres including literature. I would also point out that the novel is probably one of the least “pure” literary genres, as we can see in the genre’s low cultural status before the late eighteenth century, and I regard the characteristics as an advantage of the novel.

The word “suffer” is insistently repeated toward the end of the text, after the brothers listen to the gospels at the revival meeting and argue about the meaning of suffering (852-59). Radiclani Clytus compares Baldwin’s notion of suffering with the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of man being condemned to be free (73-81), arguing about the novelist’s “indebtedness to the Socratic ideal that an unexamined life is not worth living” (72; italics original).

In response the African American Literature and Culture Society and the *James Baldwin Review*, for example, jointly organized the symposium “James Baldwin after Ferguson,” moderated by Justin A. Joyce, in which papers were presented by Conseula Francis, D. Quentin Miller, Joshua Miller, Charles Nero, Brian Norman, and Ruby Tapia and the participants had discussion at the 26th American Literature Association Annual Conference on May 23, 2015 in Boston, Massachusetts.

When this essay was undergoing final revisions, there was a deadly clash of white supremacists and protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12, 2017, and President Trump, pretending “neutrality,” practically tolerated the violent racists.

The term “mass culture” is usually used in a negative sense, implying it is intended for what Hannah Arendt calls the “masses” (305-26) while “popular culture” is used in a more positive, or at least neutral sense.

About the function of the ending in a story, see, for example, Frank Kermode (44-48) and Iurii Lotman (262-64) (the romanization system employed by Brown University Press is not a widely used one; his first name is usually spelled “Yuri” in English).
He did not always take an apolitical attitude. According to Wikipedia, he took a “well-publicized stand for the desegregation in the Little Rock crisis” (“Louis Armstrong”), which was contemporaneous with the short story. Most recently, Jelani Cobb refers to his protest against Governor Faubus of Arkansas refusing to abide the U. S. Supreme Court’s decision that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional in his article in The New Yorker on the N. F. L players protesting against racism under the Trump administration in 2017, saying that “the belief endures, from Armstrong’s time and before, that visible, affluent African-American entertainers are obliged to adopt a pose of ceaseless gratitude — appreciation for the waiver that spared them the low status of so many others of their kind.”

The website Sonnys-Blues provides relevant information on the page “Gospel.” Regrettably, as of July 12, 2017, the audio-visual file of the second song “If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again” is not accessible from the page.

This problem should be addressed from the more specific viewpoint of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s argument on the “subaltern” rather than from the more general viewpoint of deconstruction’s argument on the indeterminacy of language, although Spivak herself is the translator of Jacques Derrida’s On Grammatology.

The name “Creole,” of course, implies a black person, or a colored person of mixed blood, born either in the Caribbean region or in America and deprived of his or her ancestors’ cultural heritage including language; the name reminds the reader of the history of destruction of native Americans’ culture and society and subsequent enslavement of Africans abducted from Africa. His name may be a pseudonym to express the historical memory that exceeds the boundary of the United States as a nation-state.

Ironically, this critical failure of really appreciating a piece of art also applies to Adorno’s inflexible view of jazz.

“The masses” as Benjamin uses the term here refers to the same group of people, or the same socio-cultural phenomenon of the interwar period, as Arendt later defines it. See also note 6.

Physically separating the performers and the audience was a vital part of performance art, both music and drama, in nineteenth-century bourgeois society, and questioning and reorganizing their distance was a significant part of twentieth-century experimental performance art.
We can also illustrate the inherently active position of the audience in a live performance by the kind of uneasiness we feel when we are watching or listening to a performance seriously in a small theater, feeling that we are not solely a subject one-directionally consuming the performance but can also be an object of other people’s attention.

The part Waters played in *On with the Show!* (i.e., that of a musical actress playing the role of an African-American cotton-picker), which hardly concerns the main story of the film, is as complicit in stereotypical representation of African-Americans as the one Louis Armstrong did in *High Society* (*On with the Show!* 00:22:11-26:00; “‘On with the Show’ (1929) Musical Digest” 00:11:49-15:36).

Clytus deals with Baldwin’s own closeness to the French existentialist philosophers. See note 3.

Roland Barthes asserts that the driving force of the narrative act comes from the confusion of the consecution and the consequence, i.e., a systematic application of the logical fallacy post hoc, ergo propter hoc [after this, therefore because of this] (16; italics original).

Overemphasis on self-responsibility and overestimation of the individuals’ power to overcome social inequalities has become more prevalent in our era of neo-liberalism, and such an attitude is more frequently to be found in the kind of people like Sonny’s brother who have fortunately made personal social ascent.

The filter bubble, according to Pariser, is created by the business strategy of the Internet giants to make “their information” “more personally relevant” so that “they can sell” “more ads” and the Internet user is “more likely” “to buy the products they’re offering” (7); it consequently offers “a vision of a custom-tailored world” (12), “a cozy place, populated by [the consumer’s] favorite people and things and ideas” (12); “[f]irst, [one] is alone in it’” (9), and “[s]econd, the filter bubble is invisible” (10). This is a portrait of an atomized constituent of the masses in Arendt’s argument, as seen above.

**Works Cited**


Nakatani Use of Music in a Literary Text: The Masses, Security of the Middle Class, and Social Ascent in James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”


*On with the Show!* Directed by Alan Crosland, Performance by Ethel Waters. Warner Brothers Pictures, 1929.


