

# God in Harlem

## Religious Symbolism in “Sonny’s Blues”

Katherine Rose Bechter

# James Baldwin

- 1924, Harlem, New York
- Religious Background
- Writing Career
- Literary Themes
- Symbolism

# Synopsis

- Set in 1950, Harlem, New York
- Sonny imprisoned for heroin usage
  - Goes to live with his brother
- Struggles with deep life questions

# Synopsis

- Daughter's death
- Promise to his mother
- Jazz piano
  - presence & significance

# Religious Symbolism

- Representation of biblical grace
- Jazz used as a spiritual baptism
- Parallels to the prodigal son parable
- Cup of trembling metaphor

# **Grace: Deprivation & Manifestation**

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**OT Comparison**

*promise to mother*



# Grace: Deprivation & Manifestation

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*promise to mother*



Daughter's death  
symbolizes grace lost



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Retraction of grace  
catalyzes the journey  
to redemption



# Grace: Deprivation & Manifestation

**OT Comparison**

*promise to mother*



Daughter's death  
symbolizes grace lost



Retraction of grace  
catalyzes the journey  
to redemption



**NT comparison**

*grace given*

# **Jazz as a Spiritual Baptism**

Addiction >>> Recovery

Progression of Scene

Water Metaphor

# **Jazz as a Spiritual Baptism**

Addiction >>> Recovery

## **Progression of Scene**

Water Metaphor

# **Jazz as a Spiritual Baptism**

Addiction >>> Recovery

Progression of Scene

## **Water Metaphor**

# **Parallel to the Prodigal Son Parable**

# Parallel to the Prodigal Son Parable

So, What's the Story?

- \ (ツ) \_ / -

**Parallel to the Prodigal Son Parable**

**Connection to**



**Narrator**



**Parallel to the Prodigal Son Parable**

Connection to



**Sonny**

# **The Cup of Trembling Metaphor**

# The Cup of Trembling Metaphor

## What's the Reference?

>>>



**Fig. 1.** “Whiskey on the rocks black background.”  
<https://www.rawpixel.com/> Accessed 8 Mar.  
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# The Cup of Trembling Metaphor

## What's the Connection?

>>>



**Fig. 1.** “Whiskey on the rocks black background.”  
<https://www.rawpixel.com/> Accessed 8 Mar.  
2023. Creative Commons 0 1.0.

# The Cup of Trembling Metaphor

## A Closer Look

Cup Given

=

Pain & Suffering



**Fig. 1.** “Whiskey on the rocks black background.”  
<https://www.rawpixel.com/> Accessed 8 Mar.  
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# The Cup of Trembling Metaphor ^ *Inverted*

## A Closer Look



**Fig. 1.** “Whiskey on the rocks black background.”  
<https://www.rawpixel.com/> Accessed 8 Mar.  
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# The Cup of Trembling Metaphor

Consider this  
“Fixing” the Metaphor,  
breaks the story



**Fig. 1.** “Whiskey on the rocks black background.”  
<https://www.rawpixel.com/> Accessed 8 Mar.  
2023. Creative Commons 0 1.0.

# The Cup of Trembling Metaphor



## Illustrates Sonny's Liberation



**Fig. 1.** “Whiskey on the rocks black background.”  
<https://www.rawpixel.com/> Accessed 8 Mar.  
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# Religious Symbolism

- Representation of biblical grace
- Jazz used as a spiritual baptism
- Parallels to the prodigal son parable
- Cup of trembling metaphor

Religious Symbolism  
in  
“Sonny’s Blues”

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