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## The Meaning in the Music: Music and the Prose of Chopin, Joyce, Baldwin and Egan

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The Meaning in the Music: Music and the Prose of Chopin, Joyce, Baldwin and Egan

The interdependence of music and literature is an enduring concept, one that predates the written word. During the era of oral tradition, stories were told through music, and music aided in memorizing longer works before pen was put to paper. This pairing has withstood the test of time, with no sign of slowing down. Just as song lyrics complement a melody, so does music lend emotional significance to the language it accompanies. However, what if audible music was missing from the equation? Is there still a purpose for music in literature when sound is absent? The following writers would certainly say so.

When an author's firm understanding of music is engaged in a piece of writing, actual sound is not necessary; instead, the writer can communicate their ideas by melding components of music into their prose, and in doing so, enriching what is written. Such is the case for Kate Chopin, James Joyce, James Baldwin, and Jennifer Egan. Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) places music alongside its predominant theme of feminism, depicting an independent female pianist who rejects the status quo. At the same time, Chopin uses music to reinforce several characters and their relationships, while also drawing attention to the potential for music to trigger repressed emotion and eventual transgression. James Joyce's "The Dead" (1914) is rich in music, featuring character performances, musical debate, and even the musicality of Joyce's eloquent prose. Joyce also calls attention to the ability of music to recall emotion, in this case those linked

to sad memories. In the music of “The Dead,” Joyce also makes statements about his native home of Dublin.

In “Sonny’s Blues,” (1957) James Baldwin calls attention to the relevance of music to African American culture and experience. The cathartic properties of music, as well as the power of music as a unifier, are reflected in a number of scenes. Baldwin promotes the potential for music as a mode of communication, with many characters learning to speak through their instrument when words fail. Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) enlists similar music-related strategies, this time within the context of America’s punk rock music scene of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century. Again, repressed memories stoked by music is a predominant theme, and like Joyce, Egan conveys a generational gap of the new millennium through characters’ listening habits and opinions about the ever-changing music industry.

What may seem at first a hodgepodge of texts, these four staples of literature spanning roughly 110 years are united under the common thread of music. Although the particulars of each text vary, their treatment of music within prose is of a similar nature. Through music, characters gain self-knowledge, and the reader insight into the author’s message. In Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Joyce’s “The Dead,” Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” and Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, music is used to enrich the text, deepen the meanings of the stories, and strengthen the authors’ arguments about the world.

### **Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening***

Beginning chronologically with *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin’s final novel, this text of early feminist literature incorporates music in a myriad of ways that deepen the text’s meaning and its broader message about the world. The story follows Edna Pontellier, a wealthy New Orleans housewife, who is inspired into disowning her former traditional life as wife and mother in

pursuit of individuality and true happiness, a process that ultimately leads to extramarital romance and a tragic suicide. Rather than an extraneous piece of setting detail, music plays a pivotal role in the text. Several of Chopin's characters are involved with music in varying capacities. Pontellier is described by the narrator as someone "very fond of music. Musical strains, well rendered, had a way of evoking pictures in her mind" (28). Characterized as a passionate listener, Edna prides herself on an ability to describe the vivid mental images that accompany each musical engagement she bears witness to. The following passage details her thoughts on a private performance by close friend and pianist, Madame Adele Ratignolle:

When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him. (28)

Chopin makes it clear that Edna is an avid fan of emotive piano music, and somewhat prone to emotional responses from certain compositions. There is also an element of unfulfilled desire within Edna accessed by this music, a yearning that increases along with the quality of music Edna encounters. While several female characters of the novel are musicians themselves, Edna fulfills the separate role of listener in this musical dynamic. In comparison, Mme. Ratignolle, a fellow Creole housewife and member of New Orleans high society, is a moderately-skilled pianist; at an early social gathering on Grand Isle, she "gaily consented to play for the others. She played very well, keeping excellent waltz time and infusing an expression into the strains which was indeed inspiring. She was keeping up her music on account of the children, she said" (26). Although evidently well-trained in the instrument, Ratignolle's relationship with the piano

and music overall exists as more of a hobby, one that is maintained primarily for the purpose of the household and for entertaining others.

Edna's passion for music begins as a mild fascination but is ultimately brought to the surface upon meeting Mademoiselle Reisz, a talented, locally-famous pianist who has opted for an artist's life of solitude over the conventional 19<sup>th</sup> century path of marriage and motherhood. Much about Mlle. Reisz contradicts the norms of music in late-19<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans. In addition to her nontraditional career path, Reisz is adamantly vocal in her distaste for current music trends, and "had only disagreeable things to say of the symphony concerts, and insulting remarks to make of all the musicians of New Orleans, singly and collectively" (90). Despite her outspoken criticisms, Reisz's inspired talent is recognized by most, earning listeners' praise with remarks including "'What passion!'" and "'What an artist!'" (29). Mlle. Reisz's musical inclination is an interesting parallel to the life of Chopin herself; in a 2004 essay for *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Texas A&M professor Doris Davis notes that Reisz's "talent in music is not happenstance. Emily Toth, Chopin's most recent biographer, has documented Chopin's own interest in music—particularly in the piano" (89). The author's real-life interest and background knowledge on this subject validate her portrayal of Reisz and the other female musicians of the novel. As a result, Chopin is able to communicate meaning through the distinctiveness of each female music enthusiast and their varying artistic identities.

Chopin's decision to write several female piano players into the novel aligns with specific trends in Victorian society and literature. Although the piano was a staple piece in many middle- and upper-class homes, the artistic space that female piano players occupied was primarily in the domestic sphere. Davis discusses the popularity of the piano at this time with many female authors: "Indeed, as domestic ideology embraced the piano for its genteel

refinement, female authors typically employed the piano in their narratives as a way to reinforce reader assumptions about and beliefs in woman's ideological place in the home" (89). *The Awakening* follows this trend in several ways, with both Adele Ratignolle and Mlle. Reisz owning pianos of their own and performing for guests regularly. However, despite these similarities with earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century novelists and their treatment of female pianists, Chopin's approach to Mlle. Reisz is starkly different than her predecessors. Whereas traditional representations of women and the piano had until that time leaned toward serving others, Mlle. Reisz serves only herself and her art. As a musician, she has crafted a fully-realized artistic identity. This type of characterization was relatively new for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a concept explored by Pennie Pflueger in an article for *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* that compares *The Awakening* to Jane Campion's 1993 film, *The Piano*:

Chopin and Campion work against the era's prevailing ideology to demonstrate that while the piano held circumscribing power, it also—and ironically—provided ready access to the sublime and thus the ability to challenge the rigid boundary that prevented women from claiming sublime experience for themselves. (469)

The "sublime" which Pflueger refers to is the emotional domain previously forbidden to female musicians, one that Reisz has accessed through her music. Mlle. Reisz is a trailblazer in terms of representations of female piano players in literature, and her distinct style rounds out this group of female music enthusiasts, each with differing ideas and levels of commitment to the piano. With the many parallels between Chopin and her characters, it cannot be for ornamental or self-serving purposes that Chopin infuses her story with music; instead, music is a medium through which Chopin achieves several literary objectives.

In one of the more striking examples of this, Chopin uses the music of Mlle. Reisz to reinforce the major theme of Edna's repressed longing for individuality and an artistic identity. Unlike the tame mental imagery that accompanies Mme. Ratignolle's traditional compositions, Mlle. Reisz's playing resonates on another level with Edna:

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth. (28)

There is a marked difference between Edna's response to the two contrasting styles, and it is far from coincidental that Mlle. Reisz elicits the greater reaction. The experience is so profound, it leads Edna to a realization of self-knowledge: her ultimate desire for personal freedom. Erin Jane Atchison of the University of Auckland writes of how the prelude "awakens, for perhaps the first time, Edna Pontellier's readiness 'to take an impress of the abiding truth' (Chopin 209), that truth being tied up in her dissatisfaction with her role as wife and mother, and a longing to live like an artist" (163). The emotionally-charged music of Reisz thus parallels the inner transformation taking place within Edna's soul. It is noteworthy that Frederic Chopin is the chosen musician for this piece, as the lifestyle of this particular Romantic-era composer is akin to Mlle. Reisz's character. Atchison details the striking similarities between Reisz and the late composer: "Like Frederic Chopin himself, she 'shuns the limelight' and 'refrains from propaganda' (Ballstaedt 18), performing as she wishes and ignoring the attentions she claims not to seek" (182). Reisz is the ideal candidate to instigate Edna's transgression, one that models an ideal lifestyle and possesses the artistic talent to appeal to Edna's desires, and the songs Chopin selects for Reisz's

performances are fitting soundtracks for these decisive moments. It is the combined effect of the music and the musician that provides the overall impetus for Edna's awakening.

The piano playing of Mlle. Reisz acts as a catalyst for Edna's drastic change in emotion and behavior. This theme has been acknowledged in other scholarly texts: that expressive piano music can be a trigger for moral discord. According to Pflueger, in Victorian society, the piano was a contradictory instrument, one that was both an "object of denied rapture to women as well as a rupturing—albeit potentially destructive—force in freeing women from Victorian constraints. As both works indicate, women's contact with the musical sublime results in transgression, posing threat to the social order" (469). Emotional piano music provided women access to previously-denied feelings of romance, creative inspiration, and individualism; as such, this specific style was out-of-bounds for 19<sup>th</sup> century female musicians. The potential for female transgression induced by piano music is confirmed by the noticeable change in Edna's mental state in the wake of meeting Reisz:

There was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna's senses as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna's spirit and set it free. (80)

With Edna's instant attraction to Reisz, Chopin is making a direct statement on the necessity of creative expression, and thus access to the "sublime," being available to women. Reisz's music fittingly comes to represent Edna's inner rejuvenation, and much more.

In addition to being used as a running motif for Edna's awakening, Reisz's music also symbolizes her doomed extramarital attraction to Robert Lebrun, a younger bachelor and son of their Grand Isle resort proprietor. Not long after introducing Edna to Mlle. Reisz, Robert flees



Grand Isle in an effort to extinguish his feelings for the married Pontellier. Edna's resulting feelings of sorrow and rejection are then perpetuated through semiregular private listening sessions with Reisz, during which she ponders over Robert's most recent correspondence:

Edna did not know when the Impromptu began or ended. She sat in the sofa corner reading Robert's letter by the fading light. Mademoiselle had glided from the Chopin into the quivering love notes of Isolde's song, and back again to the Impromptu with its soulful and poignant longing.

(66)

The Impromptu is an appropriate choice; it is a solo piece that is at times calm and subdued, and an instant later loud and percussive with rapid oscillating keys. This expressive musical form mirrors the emotional unpredictability of Edna following Robert's departure. Mlle. Reisz's piano music becomes intertwined with Edna's longing for Robert, as it is able access the romantic feelings long-buried in her subconscious.

Reisz's choice of Frederic Chopin is an especially important detail, due to the parallels between the musician and the world of the story. The Romantic-era pianist's solo compositions are deeply profound, and the musician himself lived a turbulent love life before dying at the young age of 39. Within Chopin's choice of musician is a hint of foreshadowing for Edna's similar fate. This notion is plausible after a closer look at how the music itself is described in the text:

The shadows deepened in the little room. The music grew strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty. The shadows grew deeper. The music filled the room. It floated out upon the

night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the  
silence of the upper air. (66)

The description of the music—intensely emotional and persistent—matches Edna’s mood in the wake of her tryst with Robert on Grand Isle. Reisz and Pontellier continue their intermittent listening sessions, with each further reinforcing the link between the music and Edna’s feelings for Robert. In an article for the *Southern Studies* journal titled “Progression and Regression in Edna Pontellier,” Elizabeth Fox-Genovese agrees that “the dour little pianist is closely associated with Edna’s passion for Robert” (250), while also stressing the role Reisz’s music plays in Edna’s swooning episodes:

Mlle. Reisz winds the threads of her power around Edna’s soul. Robert writes to Mlle. Reisz. Mlle. Reisz turns his letters over to Edna. She mediates their love and, in mediating, encourages it in the paths of fantasy, longing, and that soul-engulfing death of drugged escape. (251)

Chopin’s repeated pairing of Reisz’s heartfelt music with the subplot of Edna and Robert’s relationship cements her compositions as an overarching theme for their ill-fated affair. Furthermore, Chopin’s choice of song from the classic romance of Tristan and Isolde, a story of a love triangle and adultery, is expertly placed, echoing the fate of Edna and Robert. The music of Mlle. Reisz introduces themes while adding depth to others; the character of Mlle. Reisz, however, as an individual and a creative artist, is used to make a larger statement about the world of the author.

In a broader context, Chopin utilizes Mlle. Reisz to promote feminist ideals; as previously stated, Reisz’s distinctive artistic identity defied many conventional norms of 19<sup>th</sup> century female musicians. Despite the popularity of female pianists in Victorian culture, their performances

were typically restricted to domestic, entertaining purposes. This concept is represented in the novel by Madame Ratignolle. Davis elaborates on this type of conformity: “Music, for Adele, is a kind of ‘domestic decoration,’ as Kathryn Seidel aptly notes (“Picture Perfect” 230)” (91). Ratignolle’s adherence to societal expectations makes Mlle. Reisz’s departure from them stand out all the more. Reisz’s oppositional nature was undoubtedly a deliberate aim of Chopin’s in constructing this character. Davis adds to the argument that “as an astute observer of society, Chopin would also have understood that the world of serious music was male-centered and male-dominated and that most women had been, in fact, discouraged from pursuing music seriously” (93). It is for this reason that Reisz is such a groundbreaking character and literary milestone, as her commitment to her music overcame well-established patriarchal customs that Chopin herself was aware of.

Much of Reisz’s identity as a musician makes her a revolutionary female character for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. She herself explains to Edna that all true artists, herself included, must possess “the soul that dares and defies” (65). She certainly defies normality in many respects. Her dedication to her art takes priority over all customary life paths available to 19<sup>th</sup> century women, predominantly those involving marriage and motherhood. Her transgression, according to Davis, results in involuntary solitude: “Secluded in her ever-changing garrets, she attests to the likely socially-imposed isolation of any nineteenth-century woman who dared challenge the acceptable pattern for female achievement” (89). In spite of her solitude and the judgment of others concerning her lifestyle, Reisz remains firm in her life choices. The descriptions of Mlle. Reisz’s playing reject stifling expectations of female artists, both in regard to physical appearance and musical style, especially in the pieces she selects for Edna’s ears:

Mademoiselle played a soft interlude. It was an improvisation. She sat low at the instrument, and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity. Gradually and imperceptibly the interlude melted into the soft opening minor chords of the Chopin Impromptu. (66)

Rather than maintain a graceful posture, Mlle. Reisz's body contorts as she becomes absorbed in her performance. Reisz's ability to improvise is uncharted territory for Chopin's time; in a 2013 essay on music and women in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, Maura Dunst discusses how creative inspiration was seen as a trait possessed solely by male musicians: "Not only were women generally limited in their musical education, but musical genius and composition were widely considered almost exclusively male concepts" (26). With the existence of this inequitable social barrier, Reisz's unique playing and commitment to her craft trounced all customary expectations of 19<sup>th</sup> century women.

Another way Chopin refutes rigid gender roles for musicians is through the repertoire of music she compiles for Mlle. Reisz. The selected pieces differ from those typical of female pianists both in their style and their original composer, venturing into what was considered "masculine" music for the time. According to Davis, the piano was still considered a feminine instrument in some respects:

Serious music—whether in performance or composition—was viewed by most in the nineteenth century as the domain of the male. Granted, women did learn music as one of the social graces and the piano was, in fact, as pointed out by Carol Neuls-Bates, considered to be an instrument especially suitable for the female. (90)

Considering this assumption, Chopin's catalog for Reisz refutes this gendering of genres and artists. The decision for Reisz to play a Chopin Impromptu is extremely fitting, as this particular piece is a free-form composition than incorporates improvisation, a technique that requires the raw talent and creativity that was unexpected of women. Davis notes the taboo nature of a woman playing this particular Chopin piece: "While some of Chopin's music . . . was considered appropriate for women to perform and emulate in composition (Tick 337), pieces requiring technical prowess such as a Chopin Impromptu were questionable" (96). Regardless of the boldness of her song selection, Reisz is well-received by partygoers, one of which exclaims, "I have always said no one could play Chopin like Mademoiselle Reisz!" (Chopin 29). In contrast with Reisz's unconventional selections, Mrs. Highcamp, a fellow Ratignolle-esque matriarch of New Orleans' high society, performs selections by Evard Grieg, a then-current Romantic composer closely associated with the standard classical repertoire. Reisz's departure from preapproved styles for female pianists is in a sense a metaphor for her individualistic life path, that which Edna Pontellier desires. This is undoubtedly why the virtuoso's music resonates so strongly with Chopin's protagonist, and why Mlle. Reisz is an overall standout character in the novel and in the canon of 19<sup>th</sup> century American literature.

The presence of music is universal in the world of Chopin's *The Awakening*. The characters themselves are imbued with a passion for the art; from the temperate, conforming Adele Ratignolle, who performs safe, crowd-pleasing pieces for the domestic listener, to the uncustomary musical virtuoso Mlle. Reisz, and finally to Edna Pontellier, an impassioned listener whose soul is ignited by the profound music of Reisz, Chopin's characters embrace the art in its many forms. A closer look at how Chopin crafted this story reveals an author using music extensively in order to promote themes about the text itself and the world of the author.

Edna's repressed desires for individuality and romance are brought to the surface and reinforced through the piano music of Mlle. Reisz. Most importantly, the feminist ideals for which the book is renowned are furthered through Chopin's use of music; Mlle. Reisz's artistic identity, her style of music, and her dedication to her craft over prescribed life paths for women directly combat the restrictions imposed on female pianists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century western world. *The Awakening* proves that when an informed understanding of music is used in conjunction with literature, one art enriches the other.

### **James Joyce's "The Dead"**

Published roughly fifteen years after *The Awakening*, James Joyce's "The Dead," the final story of his 1914 collection *Dubliners*, is an equally versatile display of how music can elevate fiction when applied artfully. Traces of music permeate this particular narrative, including in solo piano performances, in character dialogue, and even in the prose of Joyce itself. "The Dead" focuses on Gabriel Conroy, Dublin-based university professor, literary critic, and guest of honor at his aunts' annual Christmas party. Conroy stumbles through a number of awkward social encounters throughout the evening, each episode constituting a deeper glimpse into the fragile, ever-dismantling self-concept of the protagonist. Many musicians, including Gabriel's aunts Julia and Kate Morkan, and the reputable Irish tenor, Bartell D'Arcy, are in attendance. Multiple piano performances are given throughout the evening, a select few of which are described in detail, and many of the guests' conversations center around Irish opera singers new and old. Even more unique is Joyce's ability to emulate the sonic qualities of music itself in the narrative. These details concerning music, like each of the texts in this study, are far from extraneous, and are instead used to communicate major ideas of the story.

The efficacy of Joyce's ability to incorporate music into his prose can be attributed to the fact that the Dublin native was exposed to a musically-centered environment for the majority of his life. In fact, throughout his upbringing, Joyce's family was a significant contributor to his acquired passion for music; Julian Hall of Durham University examines the biographical relevance of music to Joyce's fiction:

Joyce grew up in a family in which music was prized above literature, and his own musical abilities and knowledge were considerable. As a child and as a young man he frequently sang with family and friends the kinds of ballads and sentimental songs which appear in his novels. (10)

Joyce's musical competence is evident even upon an initial reading of "The Dead." Music unites this stream of conscious narrative under a single thread, appearing in character performances and allusions in dialogue, and by specific pieces of music coming to represent the dead themselves. The widespread use of music in this particular text has been noted by many scholars, including Paul Barolsky of the University of Virginia in an essay for the *Virginia Quarterly* review:

Music plays throughout, in fact and in memory: Mary Jane's piano performance; Aunt Julia's song *Arrayed for the Bridal*; the song sung in unison by all the guests in honor of the three hostesses; all the talk of singers current and old . . . the faint memory of old Parkinson, who sang so long ago in a tenor voice pure and mellow.

Even the characters' identities appear to be shaped by Joyce's formative musical upbringing, including Conroy's aunts, who are referred to in the story as members of "the Three Graces of the Dublin musical world" (772). In an essay discussing Irish mythology and "The Dead," Harvard University professor John V. Kelleher examines this autobiographical connection: "The

Misses Morkan, as Ellmann shows, are modelled on Joyce's grandaunts, Mrs. Callanan and Mrs. Lyons, who kept 'The Misses Flynns' School' where they taught voice and piano, dancing and politeness" (429). Joyce's intent with music, however, extends beyond these baseline connections. More specifically, in a manner not unlike Chopin, Joyce relies on music to support key themes of "The Dead," and to make statements about the social climate of his native home of Dublin.

Much like Chopin and *The Awakening*, Joyce introduces major themes of the story to the reader through carefully-selected pieces of music. Perhaps the most enduring example of this technique is the prominent association between music and the deceased character of Michael Furey, the secret childhood love of Gretta Conroy, who died tragically in his youth. Prior to the evening of "The Dead," Furey's existence had been unbeknownst to Conroy, until the traditional Irish folk ballad, "The Lass of Aughrim," introduces the character and instigates a dramatic shift in the plot and overall mood of the story. Upon preparing to retire for the evening, Conroy witnesses his wife Gretta in a meditative state, apparently captivated by a piece of piano music from an adjacent room: "He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something" (227). Though Gretta is clearly taken aback by this somber piece of music, Gabriel makes the ironic mistake of misinterpreting her mood as rapture, when instead, the music is taking her thoughts somewhere else entirely:

He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow,  
listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would  
paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of  
her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show



off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter. (776)

It is clear through Joyce's fluent narration that this particular song resonates deeply with Gretta, more so than any ordinary composition. If Gretta is in fact a "symbol," as Gabriel puts it, it is of a recollection. He is correct in dubbing the moment "Distant Music," though in this case, it is far from a random melody that has arrested his wife's attention; instead, this deeply-personal song has recalled a traumatic, repressed memory for Gretta, that of Furey, her first love. His memory had been buried for perhaps decades, only to have been unlocked by a distinct chord progression so relevant to Gretta. Julio Angel Olivares Merino writes of the connection between this particular song and Gretta's long-forgotten memory in a 2016 article for *Journal of Irish Studies*:

The composition triggers the repressed . . . Michael Furey and the music attached become a round and recoverable image of yesterday . . . Once the foundational song and invocational lyrics are unleashed, the distant music turns into an explicit and personalized wording. (Merino)

Merino's comments support the link between song and self-knowledge for Gretta. As the narrative progresses and Conroy learns the truth about this particular song and Gretta's secret past, the intent and significance behind Joyce's musical selection crystallizes.

Joyce's selection of the traditional Irish ballad, "The Lass of Aughrim," is worth noting, as it becomes a symbol for the late Michael Furey. When Gabriel first observes Gretta listening to the distant music, it appears to originate from an unknown source:

The song seemed to be in the old Irish tonality and the singer seemed uncertain both of his words and of his voice. The voice, made plaintive

by distance and by the singer's hoarseness, faintly illuminated the cadence of the air with words expressing grief. (776)

The singer is described as shaky, and the tune is somber-sounding and reminiscent of Ireland's musical past. Despite prior mentions of feeling ill, tenor and esteemed guest Bartell D'Arcy has chosen a peculiar song for this exact moment. As Gabriel learns of the song's relevance to Gretta and her history with Michael Furey, the song gains meaning. In the final moments of the narrative during which Gabriel's hopes for sexual and emotional connection are at their highest, Gretta breaks down and admits the cause of her emotional response to D'Arcy's song: "It was a young boy I used to know," she answered, 'named Michael Furey. He used to sing that song, *The Lass of Aughrim*. He was very delicate'" (781). This reveal in self-knowledge represents the final blow to Gabriel's dwindling confidence, as he discovers another man has held a greater place in his wife's heart all along. "The Lass of Aughrim" is thus a symbol representing Furey. John Kelleher argues that D'Arcy's rendition of the song is Furey's way of communicating with Gretta once again and making his existence known: "The offended dead are already at work. In the room above, stirred by some unexplained impulse, Bartell D'Arcy has begun to sing 'The Lass of Aughrim'" (428). Whether Furey is deliberately communicating through the song is inconclusive, yet it is evident that Joyce has forged a connection between the song and the subplot of Gretta and Furey's childhood romance.

A closer look at the song itself fortifies its connection to Furey's character. "The Lass of Aughrim," an Irish version of a traditional folk ballad, tells a tragic story of two doomed lovers: a fitting description of the fated romance between Gretta and Furey. The lyrics provided in "The Dead" suggest a meaningful connection:

*O, the rain falls on my heavy locks*

*And the dew wets my skin,*

*My babe lies cold . . . (776)*

These seemingly coincidental lyrics, though about a mother and her child, reflect the very fate of Furey, who died of an illness after risking perilous weather to see Gretta. Considering the song's connection to the past and the resemblance of the lyrics to this specific backstory, it is easy to see why Joyce selected "The Lass of Aughrim." The origins of the traditional ballad date back further than the contemporary pieces performed earlier in the party, making it an appropriate choice for introducing a character from the past. The song produces a ripple effect, according to Barolsky, impacting not only Gretta, who is overcome with guilt and grief, but Gabriel and the trajectory of the narrative: "Bartell D'Arcy's song not only stirs the sad memory of Gretta's former passion but deepens Gabriel's gloomy consciousness, the sad reflections on himself, on Gretta, on the Misses Morkan" (Barolsky). The combined effect of the lyrics, the descriptions of the doleful tune and its lasting effect on its listeners, and the connection to Gretta's backstory make "The Lass of Aughrim" a well-chosen symbol. Joyce's decision to use music in this respect enhances the meaning of the final scenes of "The Dead."

Like Chopin, Joyce also relied on music to weigh in on themes related to his world. "The Dead" takes place during the politically contentious period prior to the Irish War of Independence. As such, several polarizing issues arise in the narrative, including Ireland's bid for independence from British rule, and the stylistic differences between contemporary musicians and select Irish opera legends of the past. Joyce addresses the latter issue, in conjunction with the former, again through the use of music, both in character performances and in dialogue. In doing so, he conveys the alienation of an older generation, of which Gabriel is a part, their attempts at cultural preservation, and the overall tension between successive generations. This cultural

dissonance is noticeable in the subtle contrasts in how piano performances are described, as well as the audience reactions that are elicited from each. The following passage depicts a piece played by Mary Jane Morkan, a relative of Conroy's and a member of the up-and-coming generation:

Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing her Academy piece, full of runs and difficult passages, to the hushed drawing-room. He liked music but the piece she was playing had no melody for him and he doubted whether it had any melody for the other listeners, though they had begged Mary Jane to play something. (761)

Though he listens respectfully, Mary Jane's style of playing, which to Gabriel is both lacking in melody and "full of runs and difficult passages" (761), is not to Conroy's taste. In his opinion, the piece is technically proficient, yet ill-fitted for the "hushed drawing-room." Although Gabriel himself is not old, his tastes align with the elder generation. There is a distinct difference between the guests' reaction to this particular performance, and that of Aunt Julia's, an elder and highly celebrated member of the "Three Graces of the Dublin Musical World":

Gabriel recognised the prelude. It was that of an old song of Aunt Julia's — *Arrayed for the Bridal*. Her voice, strong and clear in tone, attacked with great spirit the runs which embellish the air and though she sang very rapidly she did not miss even the smallest of the grace notes. To follow the voice, without looking at the singer's face, was to feel and share the excitement of swift and secure flight. Gabriel applauded loudly with all the others at the close of the song and loud applause was borne in from the invisible supper-table. (765)

Morkan's piece resonates on a deeper level with Gabriel and his fellow guests. She appears more confident in her performance, and her playing is rooted in creative inspiration rather than technical training, much like that of Chopin's Mlle. Reisz. Aunt Julia has also chosen a piece from a repertoire of classics, one that is instantly recognized by Gabriel and others. The song choice is also slightly ironic, as a bridal-themed song starkly contrasts the age of the performer. The superiority of the hostess' musical ability is part of the story's well-defined theme of a generation gap, both in politics and in music. Gabriel's perspective in these events complements this notion, with a slight preference shown towards the music of Aunt Julia. In the face of changing times, the celebration of traditional music can be a means of trying to keep the idyllic past alive. Merino argues that the elder Morkan musicians are figureheads of this persistence:

Similarly, Kate and Julia Morkan, retired piano teacher and leading soprano respectively, fuse with the ineffable and distant music illustrating the gradual dismemberment and diffusion of the present, as symbols of the eloquent and glorious past persisting into the future.

(Merino)

Joyce utilizes these characters, and the varying receptions to their performances, to illustrate that although the ways of the past are still cherished by Gabriel and his elders, they face the incoming challenge of a younger generation that does not relate with the ways of old.

The lack of chemistry between generations pervades the conversation at dinner that evening. In key moments of dialogue, most notably the dinner conversation of opera singers past and present, Joyce furthers the theme of intergenerational tension. As the elder guests, including Aunt Julia, Aunt Kate, and Mr. Browne, reminisce about legendary opera singers of days gone

by, they fail to strike a common interest with Bartell D'Arcy, a reputable up-and-coming opera singer.

“For me,” said Aunt Kate, who had been picking a bone, “there was only one tenor. To please me, I mean. But I suppose none of you ever heard of him.”

“Who was he, Miss Morkan?” asked Mr. Bartell D'Arcy politely.

“His name,” said Aunt Kate, “was Parkinson. I heard him when he was in his prime and I think he had then the purest tenor voice that was ever put into a man's throat.”

“Strange,” said Mr. Bartell D'Arcy. “I never even heard of him.” (770)

D'Arcy's ignorance to the trailblazers of the genre encapsulates the theoretical distance between each generation's respective values. Rather than show humility or interest in the tastes of the elders, D'Arcy assumes “there are as good singers today as there were then” (769). Dublin-based Professor of music Harry White's 2008 book, *Music and the Irish Literary Imagination*, discusses Joyce's intent in his depiction of the incompatible generations:

This adjacency of two cultures lies near the heart of Joyce's musical portraiture and the ‘distant music’ which his story evokes. His protagonist is acutely aware of the transitional moment in Irish affairs which is at hand, and of the fragile transmission and ultimate departure of those ‘Three Graces of the Dublin musical world’ which he celebrates.  
(157)

The differing attitudes on music that exist between the generations, in addition to those concerning Irish independence, are each components of a larger theme. Both complement each other throughout the narrative by adding to Gabriel's anxieties surrounding the progression of time. In this respect, Joyce uses music to generate additional meaning for this concept.

In addition to Joyce's talent incorporating music in his fiction, he also emulates the sounds and qualities of music within his prose itself. This method is not limited to "The Dead" per se; however, it is certainly prominent in the text and fitting with the overall theme of music that dominates the story. According to many scholars, the words of Joyce have a musicality of their own. Hall traces this theme in the works of Joyce and claims that this particular technique often accompanies scenes in which music is a topic: "Often when a musical subject is raised the language takes on a musical quality" (51). Such is the case for Gabriel's dinner speech, which is preceded by the solo piano performances of Mary Jane and Aunt Julia and followed by the discussion of opera singers. In preparation for this key moment in the text, Joyce creates a mood of anticipation using language of a musical quality:

A pause followed, broken only by the noise of the wine and by  
unsettlings of chairs . . . Someone coughed once or twice and then a few  
gentlemen patted the table gently as a signal for silence. The silence  
came and Gabriel pushed back his chair. The patting at once grew louder  
in encouragement and then ceased altogether. (771)

In the moments leading up to Gabriel's toast, the ambient noise of the dining room, including the patter of excited guests and the scraping of chairs against the floor, is practically audible to Joyce's reader, due to the carefully chosen language. Hall credits Joyce's use of literary devices to further the musicality of "The Dead.": "Joyce creates devices from the sounds of words, often

onomatopoeic, which imitate musical techniques. These devices can be related to any period in Western music and to any genre” (52). This strategy is certainly present in this text, especially in the dinner scene. Just as Gabriel’s speech is poised to begin, Joyce continues to build the moment using musically-calibrated figurative language:

The piano was playing a waltz tune and he could hear the skirts  
sweeping against the drawing-room door. People, perhaps, were standing  
in the snow on the quay outside, gazing up at the lighted windows and  
listening to the waltz music. (771)

The repeated use of alliteration in this scene creates a percussive effect, and the specific sounds that they describe, such as “skirts sweeping” and piano playing are audible on their own; the figurative language only supplements this impression. In regard to the musical quality of Joyce’s words, Paul Barolsky supports the notion that “Joyce writes in language that achieves the status of pure song, the very sound of time passing.” This idea is validated by “The Dead,” in which Joyce utilizes the sonic qualities of his prose to accompany the topic of music during key moments of the text.

### **James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”**

Regardless of the superficial differences in time period and cultural background, the writing of James Baldwin is as intertwined with music as the previous two authors discussed. Like Chopin and Joyce, the life and literature of the Harlem native were heavily influenced by the expressive power of this creative medium. Unique to Baldwin, however, is that his passion for music is rooted in African American culture. Author Ed Pavlić points out this distinction in a 2016 essay for the *James Baldwin Review*: “Baldwin’s life and work was and is indelibly doused in the rhythms and textures of black music; all of the sense in his work traffics to and fro what he



felt and heard in the African-American musical tradition from gospel and blues, to jazz, soul, and r & b” (164). Baldwin’s immersion in African American culture and music enhanced his efficacy with the written word, creating a distinct style to his writing that is instantly recognizable. Nowhere is this style more observable than in the highly-celebrated 1957 short story, “Sonny’s Blues.” In the same article, Pavlić offers advice for studying Baldwin’s work: “Baldwin’s writing smuggled the needful reality of song onto his pages, so we read his work rather like sitting with headphones on listening to tunes, to tones” (164). By heeding Pavlić’s words and listening closely to “Sonny Blues,” Baldwin’s reader encounters a number of themes conveyed through music: the cathartic properties of music, music as an outlet for communication and self-expression, and the relevance of music to African American culture and experience.

“Sonny’s Blues” tells the story of the titular character and his estranged relationship with his older brother, an unnamed narrator. Set in Baldwin’s native home of Harlem, the narrative is steeped in racial and socioeconomic undertones. The sibling conflict builds over a number of definitive moments, reaching a tipping point when, following the death of their mother, Sonny reveals to the narrator his intention of being a career jazz musician:

It seemed-beneath him, somehow. I had never thought about it before, had never been forced to, but I suppose I had always put jazz musicians in a class with what Daddy called "good-time people."

"Are you serious?"

"Hell, yes, I'm serious."

He looked more helpless than ever, and annoyed, and deeply hurt. (47)

The narrator, a schoolteacher with a family of his own, considers Sonny's decision foolish, one that would inevitably lead down a path of drugs and crime, an all too familiar outcome for the young African American men of Harlem.

This point of contention over the viability of music as a career creates the primary conflict for the narrative: a falling out between brothers. In his book titled *Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*, author Saadi Simawe explains why the narrator at first considers the jazz genre, one that is so closely associated with African American culture, a dangerous career choice:

Sonny's older brother, who tries to escape from his African American culture by assuming a middle-class mentality, discourages Sonny from playing the blues. When he realizes that Sonny will not change his mind, he grudgingly acquiesces by telling Sonny that if he has to be a musician, it would be more practical to play classical music. (xxi)

The failure to understand Sonny and his version of the "blues," the jazz piano, is a recurring theme of the narrative. Several characters categorize jazz as an unrealistic, even dangerous career path, despite the fact that music was Sonny's source of strength during the trying times of his life: "Neither did they dare to make a great scene about that piano because even they dimly sensed, as I sensed, from so many thousands of miles away that Sonny was at that piano playing for his life" (50). The piano remains Sonny's support system through his bouts with heroin and subsequent run-ins with the law. It is only when the narrator learns Sonny's full story and sees him perform in a jazz club for the first time that he truly discovers the importance of music to his brother and its overall transcendent powers. Through music, the brothers reach an armistice in their relationship, and Baldwin a resolution for his story.

Because of the widespread nature of music in “Sonny’s Blues,” it is fitting to approach an analysis of the text with a musical lens, paying extra attention to its presence in the text and deducing what Baldwin intended in using music in that fashion. Baldwin himself was not an expertly-trained musician, yet the author was cognizant of the creative potential of utilizing music in prose. In a 2013 essay, Gerald David Naughton, Associate Professor of American Literature, agrees that Baldwin was well aware of the communicative power of music when used in conjunction with literature: “His was not a formal understanding of the music: it was engrained not in the music’s structures and construction but in its far-reaching transformative artistic potential” (Naughton). With this notion in mind, interpreting the music of “Sonny’s Blues” provides a deeper understanding of its key themes. Naughton suggests that this approach yields the most fruitful analysis of Baldwin’s writing: “Applying models of musical appropriation to literary texts may be the only method with enough scope to encompass the rich and very diverse influence exercised by the iconic James Baldwin.” Naughton’s analysis leads to one of the more universal themes of the text: the cathartic properties of music.

Validations of music as a vehicle for cathartic experience are discernible in multiple segments of “Sonny’s Blues.” There are several definitive scenes in the narrative during which characters experience the deeply-moving, soul-soothing effects of music firsthand, both in its listening and performing capacities. The lives of Baldwin’s characters are ridden with hardship and loss; as such, music provides a much-needed dose of audible medicine, one that temporarily eases the pains of life, for which these characters there are many. Simawe, in a comparison between Baldwin and Alice Walker, indicates that the former wrote with a firm understanding of the inner peace that can be achieved through music:

Walker, like James Baldwin and generations of writers and poets who profess near-religious faith in the healing and harmonizing power of certain kinds of music, seems to have identified instinctively and intuitively, long before Adorno's and Hartman's philosophical insights, those healing powers of music. (234)

A prominent scene in which this type of experience is described in detail is the neighborhood revival meeting witnessed by the narrator. In the moments preceding the brothers' heartfelt conversation, the narrator observes an assembly of community members, several of which are singing spiritual hymns. The narrator clarifies that nothing about this particular scene is unique:

Not a soul under the sound of their voices was hearing this song for the first time, not one of them had been rescued. Nor had they seen much in the way of rescue work being done around them. 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. (52)

The narrator is well-accustomed to this scene, as it is somewhat of a regular occurrence. However, on this afternoon, he is finally able to notice a finite change taking place in the demeanor of the gathered listeners.

This particular scene demonstrates Baldwin's awareness of the relieving effect of music. Despite the regularity of the revivalist gathering, the narrator is able to note, and at last appreciate, the tangible relief on the faces of those who have gathered to listen:

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; and time seemed, nearly, to fall away from

the sullen, belligerent, battered faces, as though they were fleeing back to their first condition, while dreaming of their last. (53)

Their visceral response is analogous to that of Edna Pontellier and Gretta Conroy. It is elicited by the song, the soothing melody and comforting lyrics, and by the emotional connotations that accompany them, rather than a personal or religious adoration for either of the singers. With this passage, Baldwin makes a direct statement about the ability of music to ease emotional burdens, for which the African American community of Harlem there were many. In an essay titled “James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’: A Message in Music,” author Suzy Bernstein Goldman asserts how in this scene, the music “saves” the listeners, if only for a moment:

The narrator realizes that their music saves them, for it "seemed to soothe a poison out of them" (111). The narrator's simultaneous recognition of the meaning of brotherhood and the power of music leads directly to Sonny's invitation . . . That street song is thus a prelude to the brothers' first honest talk. (Bernstein Goldman 232)

Goldman raises an important point about the narrator’s role as observer of this sublime moment. His recognition of this musical catharsis paves the way for not only the brothers’ heart-to-heart talk, but for the narrator’s understanding of the importance of “the blues” to Sonny. After debriefing this moment in conversation with Sonny, the latter compares the euphoric listening experience to that of a heroin high. Based on its influence on the characters of “Sonny’s Blues,” it appears music is equally capable of producing a dream-like state. Bernstein Goldman claims that Baldwin is suggesting music as an adaptive substitution to the maladaptive coping mechanism of drug abuse:

Sonny now tells his brother that the woman's voice reminded him "of what heroin feels like" (p. 113). This equation of music and drugs, recalling the narrator's discussion with Sonny's friend outside a bar, explains why the one could be a positive alternative to the other. (232)

Through this conversation, both the narrator and reader gain a deeper comprehension of the personal benefit of "the blues" as an outlet. His understanding of this concept is thus deepened through Sonny's redemptive return to the jazz stage.

Baldwin dedicates the final scene of "Sonny's Blues," during which Sonny gives a transformative performance on the piano, to continuing the theme of catharsis-through-music, though the focus shifts to the role of the performer. As Sonny returns to the stage for the first time since his arrest, there is a noticeable tension in his demeanor as he stumbles through the early moments of the session: "His face was troubled, he was working hard, but he wasn't with it. And I had the feeling that, in a way, everyone on the bandstand was waiting for him, both waiting for him and pushing him along" (Baldwin 57). Sonny's fellow musicians are aware of the struggle taking place within their longtime bandmate, and do what they can to encourage him to push through:

It was Creole who held them all back. He had them on a short rein. Up there, keeping the beat with his whole body, wailing on the fiddle, with his eyes half closed, he was listening to everything, but he was listening to Sonny. He was having a dialogue with Sonny. He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. (58)

This moment represents a climax for Sonny's personal story; he directly confronts his troublesome past the only way he knows how, through music. According to Rashida K. Braggs,

Williams College Professor of Africana Studies, the anxieties surmounting from the life Sonny had led until this point get in the way of the performance, yet only momentarily:

This is a moment of psychological confrontation with who he was before, who he is after his jail release, and the man and performer he wants to become. Sonny wanders through his different and seemingly separate selves, trying to find sense of everything as he plays. His struggle is a visceral experience, a feeling of discomfort and vulnerability that makes him stumble and stutter his way along. (158)

Although Sonny hits a few potholes while regaining his piano chops, it is a necessary, spiritual confrontation, one that leads to eventual redemption as Sonny regains his stride. Baldwin brings upon the resolution of “Sonny’s Blues,” both musically and literarily, as the titular character achieves inner peace once his piano strikes the right chords.

Sonny’s triumph on the jazz stage further supports the notion of catharsis accompanying musical performance. As Sonny stumbles to find his footing amongst his old band, he ultimately recovers. When this happens, it is clear to the narrator that his brother has broken new ground, both in his playing and in his mental wellbeing:

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. Yet, there was no battle in his face now, I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. (59)

Sonny makes the music his own as he relearns to play through his struggles. This final performance is profound evidence of the self-healing properties of music and Baldwin’s firm

belief in them. The narrator gains self-knowledge of the significance of music not just to his brother, but to himself. Simawe confirms that music ushers in a reconciliation for the brothers, as well as the narrator's overall attitude towards the art:

Sonny's blues triumph, not only in helping Sonny deal with ruinous realities in the Harlem of the 1950s, but also in enlightening the older brother, who suddenly sees Sonny's blues as "the only light we've got in all this darkness" (xxi)

Baldwin's understanding of the soul quenching power of music allowed him to craft the perfect resolution for Sonny, for the pair of brothers, and for his story. This understanding is breached by the narrator himself, who at last recognizes that through music, a musician may overcome pain, and that this phenomenon transposes to the listener:

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. (57)

It is quite clear, through the momentary peace of the neighborhood revival gathering and later through Sonny's redemption, that Baldwin believed in the spiritually healing potential of music and wished to convey this idea to readers through "Sonny's Blues."

Catharsis is not the only positive effect of music which Baldwin was aware of; this particular story also supports the notion of music as a mode of communication. Baldwin makes multiple references in the text to characters both "speaking" and "listening" through music, which is essentially the source of the conflict: the persistent communication issues between the



brothers. Music, for Sonny, is a more effectual mode of communication, compensating at times when words are insufficient. His version of the blues is told through the jazz piano. Bernstein Goldman affirms that the piano helps Sonny find his voice: “Later we learn of Sonny's obsession with the piano. Because he has no one to communicate with, the piano becomes his only source of expression” (232). Because of this, many of the conflicts between Sonny and other characters arise because of their inability to understand the meaning behind his music. While living temporarily with Isabel, the narrator’s wife, her family experiences great difficulty understanding Sonny and assimilating him to the family: “Isabel finally confessed that it wasn't like living with a person at all, it was like living with sound. And the sound didn't make any sense to her, didn't make any sense to any of them- naturally” (50). Baldwin uses music—Sonny’s blues—as a symbol for the character himself; those around him misunderstand both the music and the musician. Naughton supports the idea that “the inability to know the reality of Sonny's life is mirrored in the text by a failure to understand the music (jazz or bebop) that Sonny embodies” (Naughton). Because no one understands his passion, Sonny withdraws and joins the navy, thus beginning the brothers’ period of estrangement. It is not until Sonny’s return performance that the narrator learns to translate Sonny’s story from his music.

The final scene in the jazz club offers numerous examples of music as a vessel of communication. The most prominent instance is Sonny’s story, which the narrator and audience learn once the pianist is able to sink in to the performance. Not only does Sonny achieve inner peace during this session, the narrator at last makes peace with his brother’s passion, after recognizing how essential it is to his story. He watches eagerly as the band leader and fiddle player, Creole, urges Sonny to speak through his instrument:

Listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen. Now these are Sonny's blues. He made the little black man on the drums know it, and the bright, brown man on the horn. Creole wasn't trying any longer to get Sonny in the water. He was wishing him Godspeed. Then he stepped back, very slowly, filling the air with the immense suggestion that Sonny speak for himself. (59)

All of the pieces of the puzzle fall into place simultaneously, as Sonny makes the piano sing, awakening the audience and, most importantly his brother, to his version of the blues. A revelation is brought on by the music, through which the narrator realizes the interconnectedness of music, Sonny's story, and his own:

Sonny's fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn't hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, and what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. (59)

Sonny's piano speaks for the musician when words fall short. The narrator's reckoning, according to Bernstein Goldman, brings upon the resolution of the text: "This story about communication between people then reaches its climax when the narrator finally hears his brother's sorrow in his music, hears, that is, Sonny's blues" (231). As it turns out, "Sonny's Blues" is more than a cleverly chosen title, but a profound symbol, one that provides the key to understanding this complex individual.

Sonny is not the only musician of “Sonny’s Blues” that uses their instrument to communicate. The narrator picks up on this while observing Sonny’s bandmates, and the following passage describes his contemplation on the difficult task of making an instrument speak:

I had never before thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. He has to make it do what he wants it to do. And a piano is just a piano . . . While there's only so much you can do with it, the only way to find this out is to try; to try and make it do everything. (58)

His reflection indicates a greater understanding of the role of music in communication not only for Sonny, but for all musicians who seek to tell their story through their instrument. This is validated by his appreciation of the musicians’ antics on stage, through which they are clearly communicating back and forth, yet with instruments, rather than voices. The narrator watches with a newfound respect as Creole directs the band using his fiddle:

Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness. (58)

As he takes notice of the communicative tendencies of the band and their instruments, the narrator concludes that it is all musicians, and not just Sonny, for who music is the necessary creative outlet, a lifeline to sing through their collective and individual struggles. Through the narrator's keen observations of the musicians, it is clear that Baldwin understood the power of music as a means of communication. This ideal allowed the author to use music to convey themes of extreme complexity and significance to the reader, most notably the role of music in African American culture.

"Sonny's Blues" exemplifies the cultural relevance of music to the African American experience. Baldwin himself celebrated the fact that music was an integral component to African American culture. In fact, according to Braggs, Baldwin was drawn especially to the genres associated with African American culture: "The jagged grain of black music moved him; the blues opened him up and forced a visceral understanding of and confrontation with his African-American heritage—" (155). Baldwin's dedication to these genres led to their use in his fiction. Braggs further claims that Baldwin's use of music and prose was his strongest writing: "For Baldwin, it takes more than music, but rather a combination of music, word, and migration to really understand African American experience" (155). Baldwin's literary talent, coupled with a solid foundation in African American music, allowed him to best convey the complicated experience of African Americans, which is exactly what he does with "Sonny's Blues."

The narrative of "Sonny's Blues" depicts how music, for the African American community, can be a source of strength during trying times. Of particular importance is its role in uniting the community, an essential ritual for a culture that was historically displaced from its native land. Pavlić notes how for the African American community, social musical experiences were a means of recalling home in an unfamiliar, Western world:

In Baldwin's mind—maybe in his ear—clearly one very important way black people made—and still make—homes in an inhospitable and often hostile West, and in what became the United States, was to take a language with origins in Europe and with off-limit uses in the West, and pour it into songs where it could take on unique shapes, fill necessary volumes. (166)

This social healing aspect of music is evident in a number of scenes throughout the narrative; the most applicable instance is in the neighborhood assembly of spiritual singers. For a brief moment, the faces of the neighborhood put a brief pause in their goings-on to revel in the sound of the brother and sisters' voices as they penetrate the air:

The woman with the tambourine, whose voice dominated the air, whose face was bright with joy, was divided by very little from the woman who stood watching her, a cigarette between her heavy, chapped lips, her hair a cuckoo's nest, her face scarred and swollen from many beatings, and her black eyes glittering like coal. Perhaps they both knew this, which was why, when, as rarely, they addressed each other, they addressed each other as Sister. (53)

These neighbors are brought together momentarily by the allure of a song. Their hardships, which from the physical description of the singers are certain, are temporarily soothed by the sounds of "Tis the Old Ship of Zion," a traditional African-American hymn that has comforted generations with promises of salvation after death. As the lyrics suggest, the ship of Zion "*has rescued many a thousand!*" (52). The song certainly rescues those in attendance of the gathering, if only for a brief moment. It is apparent in this scene, is that music draws the community

together and soothes the complex stressors of both the past and present. The universality of music to the African American experience is further cemented by the jazz band performance of the final scene.

The final scene is yet another example of Baldwin addressing the relevance of music to African American culture. Sonny's breakthrough performance is a personal victory; however, despite its intimate nature, the performance unities the band, audience, and reader, telling all of their struggles, both individual and collective. As the narrator watches the band, he ruminates on the role of music in the narrative of African American history:

[Sonny] and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

(58)

Despite the narrator's realization, Baldwin himself was long-aware of music as a major unifying and inspiring resource for African Americans past and present; his aim was to convey this belief to the reader through this scene. The relevance of hardship to the lives of African Americans is a complex, often difficult topic to address; knowing this, Baldwin, according to Braggs, believed in the effectiveness of music as a tool for handling an issue of this magnitude:

For Baldwin, the primary path to this discomfort is music. Throughout his oeuvre, Baldwin has expressed the debt that is owed to music for its ability to communicate the stories of African-Americans. In situations

where no one will listen, on issues “no American is prepared to hear,”  
 music pushes through these obstacles. (155)

Baldwin undoubtedly delivers upon this belief with “Sonny’s Blues;” a short story that educates the reader on the relevance of music to African American culture, and the power of music itself as a form of creative expression.

In the final moments of “Sonny’s Blues,” as the narrator watches Sonny and his band, he contemplates how people may truly experience music in the manner he is awoken to: “All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations” (57). Whether this conclusion is truthful is difficult to prove, yet it is certainly true for the narrator himself. Though at first unable to hear the meaning behind Sonny’s blues, the narrator’s ears are opened through the impassioned performances of the street singers and more importantly, his brother Sonny. Bernstein Goldman further comments on the unifying power of “Sonny’s Blues,” both the music and the story itself: “Sonny’s music stirs special memories in the brothers’ lives, but these blues belong to all of us, for they symbolize the darkness which surrounds all those who fail to listen to and remain unheard by their fellow men” (233). With Baldwin’s informed and impassioned use of music in “Sonny’s Blues” comes an understanding of the importance of music for catharsis, communication, and African American culture.

### **Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad***

Jennifer Egan’s Pulitzer prize-winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) relies on music in ways that are similar to the aforementioned texts, while providing a fresh take on this theme that is steeped in components of 21<sup>st</sup> century music and technology. What could be

considered either a novel or a collection of short stories, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is an account of a group of individuals tied to the American punk rock music scene. The story is told across thirteen episodes, with each chapter dedicated to a different character's perspective. Among the cast of characters are musicians, record executives, friends and family; the text details how these characters adapt to the passing of time, the rapid advance of technology, and upheaval of the music business. The two primary settings of the story are the punk rock hubs of New York and San Francisco; Egan has personal connections to each locale, having been raised in the Bay Area during the early-1980s punk era, and later honing her writing in New York City. Both cities and their respective relevance to Egan's life correlate to *A Visit from the Goon Squad* character Bennie Salazar, an aging record producer and label owner, who begins the story as an adolescent music enthusiast in the prime of San Francisco's punk era before relocating to NYC to focus on his executive career.

Although not a punk rock musician herself, Egan's proximity to the scene she depicts in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and her keen eye for observation, result in an authentic portrayal of a music scene alienated by the drastic changing of times. During her San Francisco-based youth, the punk scene had always piqued the author's interest; in a 2010 interview with *The Paris Review* editor Christopher Cox, Egan reflects on what initially stood out to her about punk musicians:

Punks seemed real, so I was afraid of them; or rather, my dealings with them consisted of trying very hard to act as if I, too, was real. It was a nervewracking performance, and made me too insecure for much empathy. Looking back, I do feel empathy for the people I remember



from that time. What I thought of as “being real” was often, I think,  
being overtly angry or in pain. (Cox)

Egan’s simultaneous admiration, pity and fear of punk rock musicians is apparent in the novel. Her characters are unpredictable, often resorting to impulsive and rebellious behavior including drug use, acts of sexual promiscuity, and fishing a polluted river. They wear their hearts on their sleeves and are wholeheartedly dedicated to their music. Egan’s characters are fans of legitimate punk influences such as Iggy Pop and the Dead Kennedys, which further confirms the author’s familiarity with the genre. In a 2016 review essay for *Critical Sociology*, Sean Carswell comments on Egan’s extensive knowledge on a rather niche scene:

Egan’s depiction of punk rock is compelling as much for what it ignores as for what it includes. She does mention real and influential San Francisco punk bands (The Nuns, Crime) and punk venues (Mabuhay Gardens). The music she describes in Bennie and Scotty’s band is reminiscent of the legendary punk band The Screamers. She has clearly done her research. (324)

The accuracy of Egan’s account renders the novel’s characters and the issues affecting their lives as both believable and sympathetic. Egan’s pity for punk rockers stands out in particular, as the passing of time and the rapid decline of the punk rock movement results in characters either being consumed by the industry or by abandoning it altogether. The most glaring example of the dejected punk rock figure is none other than Bennie Salazar, who throughout the course of the text undergoes a character arc spanning from promising music talent scout and garage band bassist, to wunderkind record executive enjoying peak success during the heyday of punk and

alternative music, to an aged and irrelevant has-been, displaced by the passing of time and the upheaval of the music business.

All of the subplots and characters of Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* gravitate loosely around the central character of Bennie Salazar, a record producer and founder of the famous punk label, Sow's Ear Records. The novel touches on several periods of Salazar's life, ranging from his high school days as a promising music enthusiast and bassist for the punk rock garage band, The Flaming Dildos, to his successful stint as record label founder and producer. One glaring theme that Egan promotes through Salazar's story is the impermanence of fame and success in the music industry, and the personal repercussions of those who dedicate their lives to it. Because of its rapid evolution, Egan saw the music business as the perfect marker for the passing of time in the lives of her characters, most notably Bennie. In a 2013 essay on *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Morgan Ewald addresses Egan's pairing of music and time:

For many of the characters in Egan's novel, the life of a musician is a strong force to be reckoned with in dealing with one's past and lifetime.

The music world is constantly changing, which gives Egan a good reason to use this as the outlet for her novel about time marching on. Time stops for nobody – not even the greatest musician (2)

Such is the case for the once-great Bennie Salazar, who at the beginning of the text is already on the decline of a formerly-prosperous career. His introductory chapter places Bennie in the midst of an effort to revamp a band he discovered years ago, a sister duo called Stop/Go, who had never gotten their promised big break, a missed opportunity that Salazar took as a personal failure.

The shame memories began early that day for Bennie, during the morning meeting, while he listened to one of his senior executives make a case for pulling the plug on Stop/Go, a sister band Bennie had signed to a three-record deal a couple of years back (Egan 19).

Immediately noticeable is Bennie's romanticizing of the duo's back catalog, which is coincidentally reminiscent of the sounds of his youth. In spite of the lack of support from his label colleagues, Bennie remains stubbornly fixated on what the band *was*, rather than their current marketability:

Then, Stop/Go had seemed like an excellent bet; the sisters were young and adorable, their sound was gritty and simple and catchy ("Cindy Lauper meets Chrissie Hynde" had been Bennie's line early on), with a big gulping bass and some fun percussion—he recalled a cowbell. (19)

Yet time has clearly passed, and the music of Bennie's youth symbolized by Stop/Go is practically extinct. Bennie ruminates on the current state of the band, thoughts which further reflect the passing of time: "The sisters were pushing thirty, his executive producer, Collette, informed Bennie now, and no longer credible as recent high school grads, especially since one of them had a nine-year-old daughter" (19). It becomes clear this issue is not an isolated incident about a specific band or musician, but rather a broader issue affecting a specific culture of which Bennie is one of the few remaining relics. Bennie is insecure about his own irrelevance, and his anxiety surrounding the missed opportunity of Stop/Go is indicative of larger issues of regret and longing for the past: "But now his own shame tinged the Stop/Go sisters' failure, as if *he* were to blame. And that feeling was followed by a restless, opposing need to recall what had first excited him about the sisters—to feel that excitement again" (21). As Bennie ages and becomes less

effective in his career, time-related issues become an Achilles heel. According to Martin Moling in a 2016 article for *Arizona Quarterly*: “Bennie also has trouble keeping up with the passage of time: once a towering figure on the national music scene, he has become ‘irrelevant’ and is only ‘referred to in the past tense’ in the novel’s 2020s” (53). Egan thus uses music, more specifically the evolution of genres and the industry, to emphasize the distance between Bennie’s ideal past and the present, an issue all too familiar for punk rock musicians.

Egan pairs specific music with the repressed personal traumas of character Bennie Salazar. Like “The Lass of Aughrim” and Gretta Conroy, certain music from punk rock’s golden age and Bennie’s youth has the tendency to recall undesirable memories that he would rather forget, episodes he refers to as “memory spasms.” This connection between music and memory is a complex issue; despite the correlation between music and Bennie’s negative memorable experiences, there is also that between music and nostalgia. The punk music of Bennie’s formidable years triggers positive sentiments, a form of musically-guided reminiscing. Moling emphasizes how Egan uses music as the crucial link between her characters and their idyllic pasts: “Egan’s characters pine to recapture the innocent, carefree, and blissful moments of their younger days. Bennie prizes rock music precisely for this quality of evoking the feeling of eternal youth” (54). Bennie begins his quest to revive Stop/Go with this sentiment in mind. The narrator describes the relevance of this music to Bennie’s personal history, which he hopes to recapture somewhat through listening:

The deep thrill of these old songs lay, for Bennie, in the rapturous surges of sixteen-year-old-ness they induced; Bennie and his high school gang . . . none of whom he’d seen in decades . . . yet still half believed he’d find waiting in line outside the Mabuhay Gardens (long defunct). (23)

The long-shuttered venues of Bennie's musical past are symbols of the punk rock era in its prime, monuments of a once-thriving subculture now existing only in memory, for which recorded music is the only remaining access point. After meeting the Stop/Go sisters at their home and crowding into their basement studio with his son Christopher and assistant Sasha, Bennie is wildly enthused by the prospect of an impending nostalgic moment: "Bennie experienced a bump of anticipation; something was going to happen here. He knew it. Felt it pricking his arms and chest" (29). As the band begins playing their first new material in years, Bennie experiences an elation reminiscent of his youth, a time when punk rock was new and exciting, and he and his friends had their entire lives ahead of them. Moling elaborates on music's ability to strike a chord deep within Salazar:

In touching him in the center of his bodily core—beyond the grasp of cerebral control—and inducing a pleasurable vertigo, music enables Bennie to fully embrace the present moment . . . Bennie is "on fire," not only because he is aflame with the vertiginous vehemence of the music, but because he seeks to perpetuate this moment. (55)

Bennie being "on fire" is an appropriate description, as these moments prove to be temporary, and eventually burn out. Much as "The Lass of Aghrim" awakens the memory of Michael Furey for Gretta in Joyce's "The Dead," so does the music of Bennie's past, which causes shameful memories of his past to resurface.

Immediately following the initial euphoria induced by the nostalgic sounds of Stop/Go, the music directs Bennie's thoughts to several darker moments of his life. Egan herself appears cognizant of the link between music and the past; in the same 2010 interview with *The Paris Review*, Egan explains her personal experience with managing her past:

I find myself thinking more about the past as I get older . . . maybe because there's just more of it to think about. At the same time, I'm less haunted by it than I was as a younger person. I guess that's probably the ideal: to reach a point where you have access to all of your memories, but you don't feel victimized by them. In the book, people's relationship to memory is usually an indicator of their present-day comfort; Bennie, as you mention, is besieged by shameful memories. (Cox)

Egan's awareness of the difficulties of battling the past, and how music can play a role in recalling traumatic memories, lends itself to the portrayal of Bennie's struggle. The momentary high induced by punk music soon gives way to Bennie's shameful memories and their accompanying emotions. This is hinted at even before the rehearsal; while Bennie discusses the band at a meeting with record label personnel, talk of Stop/Go's "sound" reminds Bennie of a very specific, yet highly-embarrassing event from his more successful stint as record executive:

"I've got their new rough mix," Collette said. "The vocals are buried under seven layers of guitar."

It was then that the memory overcame Bennie (had the word "sisters" brought it on?). (20)

Thoughts of Stop/Go's music recall for Bennie a regretful incident from the prime of his career: while visiting a convent with the intent of recruiting singing nuns for a recording, Bennie had succumbed to impulse and inappropriately kissed the Mother Superior. This embarrassing piece of self-knowledge, which until that point Bennie had done his best to suppress, is awoken by the vocals of Stop/Go. Egan makes it apparent that Bennie is still haunted by this slip-up: "Even now, Bennie could hear the unearthly sweetness of those nuns' voices echoing deep in his ears"

(20). The trend of music triggering shameful memories continues as Bennie drives to the Stop/Go house, listening to San Francisco punk legends the Dead Kennedys along the way:

As Jello Biafra was thrashing his way through ‘Too Drunk to Fuck,’ Bennie’s mind drifted to an awards ceremony a few years ago where he’d tried to introduce a jazz pianist as ‘incomparable’ and ended up calling her ‘incompetent’ before an audience of twenty-five hundred.

(23)

The punk rock anthem, though at first recalling Bennie’s youthful euphoria, eventually leads his thoughts to another painful recollection: an embarrassing slip of the tongue at an awards show. The band’s rehearsal ultimately has the same effect, recalling additional memories and thus confirming this tendency is part of a larger issue for Bennie.

When the Stop/Go rehearsal begins and the initial wave of excitement subsides, Bennie’s thoughts are infiltrated by other painful memories, ushered in by the sounds of the punk duo. Moling comments on how Bennie is trapped in a feedback loop between the music and days gone by: “Ironically, while Bennie attempts to recapture the ‘surge of sixteen-year-old-ness’ rock music is capable of inducing, he is entrapped in a web of highly unpleasant memories” (56). As the sisters begin, Bennie experiences the familiar thrill of punk music:

Then the sisters began to sing. Oh, the raw, almost-threadbare sound of their voices mixed with the clash of instruments—these sensations met with a faculty deeper in Bennie than judgment or even pleasure; they communed directly with his body, whose shivering bursting reply made him dizzy. (30)

Despite the knee-jerk reaction of excitement during which Bennie felt that “he was on fire,” he is ultimately led down the painfully-familiar mental path of embarrassing life events, this time involving an email incident:

And from this zenith of lusty, devouring joy, he recalled opening an email he’d been inadvertently copied on between two colleagues and finding himself referred to as ‘Hairball.’ God, what a feeling of liquid shame had pooled in Bennie when he’d read that word. (30)

As soon as this humiliating memory creeps in, Bennie is unable to regain the prior euphoria from moments ago. He tries in vain to avoid a panic attack and pick up where he left off before the memory of the email occurred: “Music. Bennie was listening to music. The sisters were screaming, the tiny room imploding from their sound, and Bennie tried to find again the deep contentment he’d felt just a minute ago. But ‘hairball’ had unsettled him. The room felt uncomfortably small” (30). His efforts prove futile; Bennie cuts the rehearsal short, unable to shake the mental image of his former shame.

Considering the near-100-year period separating the authors, there are still many similarities between the way that Joyce and Egan use music to address themes related to time. Carswell touches on the relevance of this topic to Egan’s novel, asserting that perhaps time is the titular goon after which the book is named:

The ‘goon squad’ of the novel is time. It catches up to all of us eventually. Our youth turns into middle age, into old age, into death. More specifically, from the novel’s perspective, our youthful transgressions turn into middle-age complacency, which turns into miserable old age, which turns into death. (323)



Many of Egan's characters progress through Moling's described life stages, some experiencing great difficulty with the complacency and old age stages. Much like the tension caused by differences in musical preferences between successive generations in "The Dead," *A Visit from the Goon Squad* paints a similar picture, one that is exacerbated by the rapid progression of the music business at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Though the text occurs over a number of Bennie Salazar's life stages, an overarching theme for this specific character is his anxiety surrounding his increasing state of irrelevance. His gradual obsolescence is caused by an unapologetic music industry that exploits youth and beauty, casting aside those who no longer possess either. This anxiety shows itself in Bennie's resistance to contemporary music trends. In the eyes of Bennie, the gritty, analog punk recordings of old would always be superior to newer digital recordings, music which Bennie was responsible for promoting due to necessity:

Bennie knew that what he was bringing into the world was shit. Too clear, too clean. The problem was precision, perfection; the problem was digitization, which sucked the life out of everything that got smeared through its microscopic mesh. Film, photography, music: dead. *An Aesthetic Holocaust!* (23)

Bennie maintains an inward resistance towards the very music he perpetuates, music he considers devoid of soul. Rather than stand by the punk music he loves, which he knows will no longer sell, Bennie plays into the digital fads of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an act of self-preservation, a move that his former self would no doubt consider to be "selling out." Moling asserts that Bennie's creative concessions that are dictated by a survival of the fittest mentality:

Bennie has no choice but to perpetuate the crimes of his competitors in order to stay afloat in the music business. He no longer has the luxury of responding to his own artistic impulses, but is compelled to adhere to the market's standards of cleanliness and ring tone compatibility. (62)

This duality, in which Bennie's outward career moves contradict his inner beliefs, creates a sense of self-loathing for the aging record executive. He is sadly unable to resist the rapidly changing industry. In Egan's final chapter, a satirical take on the future of music set in the 2020s, Bennie appears to have fully surrendered to current trends and is more concerned about viral marketing than the actual music: "'The problem is,' Bennie went on, 'it's not about sound anymore. It's not about *music*. It's about reach. That's the bitter fucking pill I had to swallow'" (312). Egan understood the bitter pill Bennie describes, the necessity of conforming or being left behind; her awareness of the unforgiving nature of the music industry leads to an honest portrayal of a real issue affecting a specific niche of people.

Egan continues this theme by including multiple instances of Bennie dwelling on the past, his youth, and the prime of punk rock music. He does this by listening to recordings of punk rock legends, while reminiscing on this idyllic period that has long passed: "Driving to pick up his son, Bennie alternated between the Sleepers and the Dead Kennedys, San Francisco bands he'd grown up with. He listened for muddiness, the sense of actual musicians playing actual instruments in an actual room" (22). Bennie's use of the word "actual" in reference to the music of his youth hints at his disdain for the digital revolution of recorded music in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. But Bennie's problem extends beyond technological improvements in musical recordings to the very ethos of contemporary music, which to him has become more of a business than an art. Before the rehearsal with Stop/Go, he reflects on what he considers a

degradation of the art over time: “Nowadays the quality (if it existed at all) was usually an effect of analogue signaling rather than bona fide tape—everything was an effect in the bloodless constructions Bennie and his peers were churning out” (22). In spite of his questionable career moves, Bennie remains fixed in his opinions and his listening preferences, a stubbornness that is part of a larger issue: a sentimental longing for youthful days gone by. Dr. Gerard Moorey of the University of Gloucestershire raises this point in a 2014 essay for *Popular Music and Society*: “Like so many others of his generation, Bennie fetishizes the alleged authenticity of pre-digital recordings, his nostalgia for the album as a commodity fetish dovetailing with his nostalgia for his youth” (78). This form of resigned reminiscing is a broader trend with aging music industry professionals, for who the music of the past represents an opposition to ever-changing trends. Sean Carswell, a former punk fanzine contributor and author of a secondary text used in this essay, reflects on how he himself has remained relatively unchanged in his listening habits over the years:

I thought aging would bring with it more sophisticated musical tastes, but I still listen to punk rock almost exclusively . . . I still won't buy anything produced by a major label. Sometimes I feel foolish for this, but the fact that I turned 44 this year doesn't make mainstream pop, rock, country, or rap sound any better. My age doesn't improve the inferior sound quality of an mp3. (324)

As Carswell's words confirm, Egan was able to contextualize the alienation of members of the punk scene of the 80s, who drastic advancements in music and technology had left behind, with her depiction of Bennie Salazar. What remains unclear is whether any of these individuals are better off dwelling in the past. But Egan's message on the evolution of music is not entirely of

resignation. Instead, she opts to end the novel on a hopeful note that suggests a possible solution to the downward spiral of music.

Perhaps the greatest contrast between *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and the previous texts is the message that Egan leaves the reader with in the final chapter, which (in spite of the despairing music industry portrayed in the text) reaffirms the readers faith in the potential of music. Set in Egan's fictional yet very plausible 2020s, this version of the future depicts the trends of the text taken to the extreme. The music industry's obsession with youth eventually leads to toddlers dictating the trends of technology and popular culture, and an overemphasis on digitization and efficiency gives way to what Egan coins "Pure Language," a streamlined form of texting in which all superfluous letters, words, and innuendos are omitted for a streamlined communication experience. The musical landscape was forced to follow suit and adapt to this form of communication, catering to the preverbal children who had become the new target market: "Fifteen years of war had ended with a baby boom, and these babies had not only revived a dead industry but become the arbiters of musical success. Bands had no choice but to reinvent themselves for the preverbal" (313). Though certainly exaggerated, Egan's futuristic music industry is not impossible within the trends portrayed in the text. In this unlikeliest of times, Egan provides a solution to the conflicts of time and music that haunt her characters. The resolution comes in the form of a concert by Scotty Hausmann, Bennie's high school friend and bandmate, an individual who unlike Bennie, never conceded his punk rock beliefs.

In a marrying of techniques new and old, an aged Bennie and younger business partner Alex promote an outdoor concert in New York, showcasing the nostalgic sounds of Scotty Hausmann with the viral marketing techniques of the 2020s. Members of all generations gather for the concert, in what the reader anticipates to be a clash of demographics and trends.

Hausmann, an elderly, nearly-defunct shell of his former punk self, seems like the most unlikely candidate to capture the attention of such a polarized audience, yet that is precisely what happens:

It may be that two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on slide guitar. Whatever the reason a swell of approval palpable as rain lifted from the crowd and rolled out toward its edges. (335)

Hausmann’s music, which is described as featuring a “mournful vibrato” and “the jangly quaver of slide guitar” (313), succeeds in uniting the concertgoers in a moment of musical camaraderie. Moorey argues that Egan is making a direct statement about the unifying capability of music: “The power of music—or at least, in this instance, the sight of a musical artifact—to produce a rapprochement is a theme that also figures prominently in the final chapter of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*” (76). It is also important to note that although decades have passed, and Hausmann is no longer considered “punk” by any means, Egan has in essence revived the ethos of punk in a raw, moving performance that is able to capture the hearts of all listeners in a time of extreme commercialism. Moling offers further comments on how Hausmann’s warm reception refutes the contemporary trends of the 2020s Bennie was fundamentally opposed to:

This purity is the antithesis of T-language’s artificial immaculacy, a punk purity spawned by the long decades Scotty has lived off the radar of society at large and remained “untouched” by the digital revolution. Fuelled by his “rage,” Scotty’s music comes to resemble the punks’ apocalyptic noise. (70)

Egan opts to leave her readers with a hopeful possibility: although time progresses, trends change and disappear, and people age, the very soul of punk may live on in other forms of pure art.

### **Conclusion**

Four accomplished authors and texts from different eras and backgrounds, yet a similar trend emerges from each: the manner and extent to which music is used to the benefit of the story. This essay touched on texts from Kate Chopin, James Joyce, James Baldwin, and Jennifer Egan, with a specific focus on how music furthers their ideas, both about the stories themselves and the authors' time and place. And while there are many commonalities, there are also distinguishable qualities in the manner music is used in each text, making each unique in its own right.

Kate Chopin's magnum opus *The Awakening* relies on music to reinforce themes within the novel and about her home of New Orleans. With regards to its feminist ideals, Chopin uses the character of Mademoiselle Reisz to refute inequitable gender roles of 19<sup>th</sup> century music and culture. Reisz's music selections, her creative inspiration and talent, and her overall commitment to music over a conventional life contribute to the text's larger message of feminism. The foil character of Madame Ratignolle, a wealthy housewife who represents the norms of Victorian culture by using the piano for domestic purposes only, emphasizes Reisz's importance. Chopin also uses Mlle. Reisz's music as the soundtrack to Edna's awakening; while Edna listens to Reisz perform, she experiences profound emotions closely associated with her quest for independence. In the same vein, Reisz's music later becomes a motif for Edna's affair with Robert Lebrun, with songs matching Edna's mood in Robert's absence and even foreshadowing the lovers' fate.

James Joyce's "The Dead" relies on music as the score for protagonist Gabriel Conroy's evening at the Morkan's holiday party. As in Chopin's text, several characters give piano performances for the entertainment of partygoers. In these scenes, Joyce conveys a generation gap through differing opinions in music. Gabriel and his peers show a deliberate preference for the emotive music of the hostess Aunt Kate over the younger Mary Jane's technically-trained playing. This theme continues during dinner, as the younger singer Bartell D'Arcy is unable to relate to the older guests' conversation of legendary opera singers of the past. Perhaps the most memorable use of music in "The Dead" is "The Lass of Aughrim." The traditional ballad acts as a symbol for the late Michael Furey, Gretta's first love. Heard from an adjacent room, the song and its memory instigate a sorrowful response from Gretta that alters the course of the narrative, and of Gabriel's self-concept. In addition to the ways Joyce generates meaning for "The Dead" with music is the undeniable musical quality of his writing. The author's skill with manipulating sounds and tempos in his prose results in a reading experience not unlike song lyrics.

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" follows suit in portraying the potential for music to elicit an emotional response, yet Baldwin opts for the cathartic properties, rather than repressed emotion as in Chopin, or sad memory relations as in Joyce. Included in the short story are multiple scenes in which the emotional pain of characters is soothed by music, either by listening or performing. Harlem residents pause for a moment to bask in the sounds of neighbors singing a spiritual hymn, and Sonny manages to play through his struggle during his return performance to the stage. The importance of music to the African American community permeates the text, with characters brought together in spite of their hardship, under the ritual of music. Additionally, Baldwin highlights the use of music as communication; the jazz club musicians in the final scene

are able to communicate wordlessly through their instruments to each other and the crowd, and most importantly, Sonny learns to tell his story with the piano and his version of the blues.

Despite being the one story that departs from the piano, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* follows in the footsteps of the previous authors, while also adding a touch of 21<sup>st</sup> century music culture and the punk rock scene. The music-memory connections of Joyce are echoed in Egan, with songs from aged record executive Bennie Salazar's past triggering long-repressed shameful memories. Time is a major theme of the novel, and music is a fitting complement; Bennie hopes to relive the thrill of youth by listening to the music of his formative years. Egan portrays a generational gap that resembles that of "The Dead." Bennie and his peers remain opposed to current music trends and consider the recordings of the past as untouchable. Sadly, Bennie must make concessions to stay afloat in the music industry by working to promote the very music he resents. Unlike Joyce, Egan bridges the generational gap with a closing message for the novel in the form of a captivating performance by Scotty Hausmann: in the face of progressing time and incessant change, music remains a constant unifier, and pure art is a universal language.

Two mediums of art that are each rich in their own right, yet when used in conjunction with one another, the sum is undoubtedly greater than its parts. The authors under discussion prove outright that regardless of the inaudibility of the printed page, music can still be employed in literature to ensure their message is heard. Through the universal language of music, each author connects character to character, reader to character, and author to reader, helping each party better understand the other. Without the presence of music in these influential texts, their most important messages would fall on deaf ears.



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