Journal Questions for James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” Name\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1.     Carefully observe the details of the story's opening, how the narrator learns of his brother's downfall, where he is at the time, the interaction with Sonny's friend, etc.  How do these scenes help set up the issues in the story?

2.     How do events in the past, presented as flashbacks or as the narrator's recollections, help to develop the plot and characterization in "*Sonny's Blues*"?  Consider the narrator's description of his and Sonny's childhood, their lives on the Harlem streets, the Sunday dinners at home, the death of their uncle, the narrator's last conversation with their mother, etc.

3.      Toward the end of the story, as he is trying to explain his addiction to heroin and his passion for music, Sonny tells the narrator that everyone tries to find a way not to suffer, even the narrator himself.  What are the narrator's ways of coping with his pain and fear?

4.     How would you describe the tone of the ending?  What sort of resolution (if any) does the story or the narrator come to?  Does the narrator express optimism?  Pessimism?  Something in between?

5.     *Sonny's Blues* is populated by images of darkness and light.  Trace a series of these images and discuss how the narrator uses them to create a particular atmosphere and to help tell his story.

6.     Aworks setting refers to both the time (historical and also time of day or year) and the place (geographical, as in New York, Harlem, Greenwich Village, and also local, as in setting certain scenes in subways, apartments, dark roads, etc.) in which the actions of the story occur.   How do Baldwin's choices about setting help you understand the theme or meaning of the story.  Do a little research and describe the setting at the time of the story.

7.     Do Sonny and his brother change in this story?  If so, what do you identify as the catalyst for their changes and where do we see these changes?  If not, how can you tell that they remain stagnant?

8. Consider carefully the narrator's language in the climactic scene, when Sonny plays the piano.  What elements of style can you identify here, and what is their effect?  What is the nature of the epiphany the narrator experiences here, and how does it connect with episodes recounted earlier in the story -- e.g. the mother's story of the father and his brother?

9. What statement does the story make about the relationship of art to life or about the relationship of art to suffering? What is the "cup of trembling" referred to in the last line?  How does this Biblical allusion work to help the reader understand what will or has happened to Sonny, his brother, their family and their community?