**“Woman Hollering Creek” Questions**

1. What do you learn about Cleófilas in the very first section of the story, which is told as a flashback? What are the contrasts between “then” and “now” that Cisneros establishes in this

section?

2. How does becoming a mother change Cleófilas’s outlook on her situation? Does she define

herself through motherhood? Explain.

3. How does the assumption that “to suffer for love is good. The pain all sweet somehow. In the

end” (para. 8) help shape Cleófilas’s behavior? Does she ultimately reject this view? How can

you tell?

4. Why didn’t Cleófilas behave as she thought she would when Juan Pedro first struck her? Why do you think she was “speechless, motionless, numb” (para. 24)?

5. What is the importance of the character of Maximiliano? What does Cleófilas’s perception of

him tell us about her?

6. In her new home in Texas, Cleófilas lives between Dolores and Soledad. In Spanish, *dolores*

means “sorrow” and *soledad* means “solitude.” What does the author’s choice of these names for neighbors suggest about Cleófilas’s life in this Texas town? What other evidence can you find to

support this interpretation of Cleófilas’s life in Seguin?

7. How does Cisneros portray the situation of both men and women—the community in general—who have immigrated to the United States from Mexico? Judging from the depiction in “Woman Hollering Creek,” have they found a better life than the one they left?

8. Why doesn’t Cleófilas want to return to her father’s home in Mexico? Describe the various “ways out” she considers over the course of the story. Why does she finally decide to return to Mexico?

9. Why are *telenovelas* important in this story? What role do they play in women’s lives? How do they affect Cleófilas’s views about love and relationships?

10. What finally causes Cleófilas to reconsider her ideas about love? At the end, do you think

that she still believes in “passion in its purest crystalline essence” and finding “the great love of one’s life” (para. 6)?

**Questions on Style and Structure**

1. What do you learn from the opening paragraph? Consider both the information provided and the attitude. How do the sentence structure and the language—the paragraph consists of one long sentence—reinforce meaning?

2. In this story, Cisneros often makes use of compelling sentence fragments. Find three examples, and explain the effect they have on the meaning of the passage.

3. “Woman Hollering Creek” is told from various points of view—mainly third person, with first person introduced through dialogue. Why do you think Cisneros uses this technique? How would the story have been different if the entire story were told from Cleófilas’s viewpoint?

4. Paragraph 21 begins with “The first time she had been so surprised she didn’t cry out or try

to defend herself.” The first time for what? Why might Cisneros choose not to identify specifically what the action was?

5. How does Cisneros’s language reveal her attitude toward the men in the story? Does she condemn them? Pay careful attention to the section describing “The men at the ice house” (paras. 26–28). For instance, what does the metaphor “the fists try to speak” (para. 28) suggest about the men in this story and the lives they lead?

6. How do the two settings differ—the town where Cleófilas grew up and the town where she

lives with her husband? What larger meaning do you think Cisneros is driving at with the juxtaposition

of “The town of gossips” with “The town of dust and despair” (para. 39)?

7. Explain the role La Gritona (Woman Hollering Creek) plays in the story. What does it symbolize? How does the meaning of the symbol change over the course of the story?

8. What can you infer about the characters of Felice and Graciela based on their phone conversation? How do they serve as foils to Cleófilas?

9. What references do you find to speaking up, staying silent, being heard or not heard, whispering, yelling, speaking in different languages, and telling stories? How do these descriptions work together to develop the theme of finding voice?

**“Woman Hollering Creek” Multiple-Choice Test**

**1. The word “divine” in paragraph 1 most**

**closely means**

a. foreshadow

b. heavenly

c. foresee

d. delight in

e. guess

**2. What the narrator says about films and**

**milk shakes in paragraph 5 suggests that in**

**this town**

a. there are a lot of diverting pastimes

b. things are much the same as anywhere

else

c. the younger generation is better at

enjoying leisure activities than are the

“aunts and godmothers”

d. the prosaic nature of the recreational

activities makes life dull

e. all good things are tempered by bad

**3. Paragraph 10 contains an example of each**

**of the following EXCEPT**

a. pun

b. onomatopoeia

c. simile

d. sentence fragment

e. allusion

**4. In paragraph 12, there is a shift**

a. from literal to figurative

b. in point of view

c. from narration to dialogue

d. from figurative to literal

e. in tone

**5. The syntax in paragraphs 33 and 34 most**

**likely reflects Cleófilas’s**

a. rapid thought process

b. stuttered style of speech

c. muddled memories of the event

d. struggle to learn English

e. excitement at returning home

**6. Which of the following references to plant**

**life is an example of figurative language?**

a. “to fulfill her bouquet conspiracy”

(para. 2)

b. “pecan trees rustling like ladies in stiff

petticoats” (para. 4)

c. “sunflowers — so tall they had to

be supported with broom handles”

(para. 18)

d. “roses whose sad scent reminded Cleófilas

of the dead” (para. 18)

e. “who doesn’t care at all for music or . . .

roses” (para. 32)

**7. Which of the following best describes what**

**Cleófilas feels for Felice?**

**a. tempered respect**

**b. irreverent awe d. qualified amazement e. incredulous admiration**

**“Sonny’s Blues” Questions**

1. It is easy to see that the narrator of “Sonny’s Blues” and his brother, Sonny, represent two

sides of the same coin: one brother is employed as a math teacher, married, clean living; the

other is a jazz musician, single, struggling with heroin addiction. Discuss the ways in which

Baldwin brings these two characters to life and makes them more than just opposites. Which

brother do you think is the story’s main character? Explain your answer.

2. The backdrop of 1950s Harlem and the story of the narrator’s uncle’s death (para. 94) suggest

that the characters have suffered from vicious and institutionalized racism. Where else do you

see the impact of racism in the story? Do you think that Sonny’s addiction and the narrator’s

repression and rigidity are caused by their natures or by the social forces of racism?

3. “Sonny’s Blues” is a story about listening, and not just the effort of the narrator to learn to

listen to Sonny. Track the different descriptions of music in this story. How does each one add

another dimension to the story’s meaning? How does each one say something about the needs

and desires of the story’s characters?

4. Why do you think the narrator gets back in touch with Sonny when his daughter, Grace, dies?

5. Do you think this story has a happy ending? Why or why not?

6. This story depends somewhat on a view of Harlem in the 1950s. Research the ways in which

Harlem has changed in the last fifty years. Do you think the change is superficial or profound?

Could a tale such as the one told in “Sonny’s Blues” take place there today? If so, in what ways

would it be different?

7. Sonny tells his brother that Louis Armstrong is “old-time, down home” music. He likes the

music of Charlie “Bird” Parker. Listen to music by Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker, and

describe the differences between them. Parker’s version of “White Christmas” gives the listener

a particularly vivid understanding of the bebop style he exemplified and that so intrigues Sonny.

How does Baldwin illustrate bebop in the story’s last scene at the club?

8. Do you agree that suffering is necessary to create art? Consider such examples as painter

Vincent van Gogh, musician Kurt Cobain, and poet Sylvia Plath, but also jazz trumpeter Miles

Davis and Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards, who both overcame heroin addiction.

**Questions on Style and Structure**

1. What is the effect of the repetition of the word “it” in the first two paragraphs?

2. The first sentence of the story’s second paragraph begins, “It was not to be believed.” What

does the use of the passive voice suggest about the narrator’s response to the news he has just

gotten?

3. Why do you think the plot of this story is not in chronological order? Try rearranging the

events of the story so that they are in chronological order. How does it change the story Baldwin

is telling?

4. The narrator has a conversation with an old neighborhood friend of Sonny’s (paras. 9–46).

How does that conversation shape the characterization of the narrator? How does it shape our

expectations for the outcome of the story?

5. What do you think is the purpose of the narrator’s description of a typical Sunday afternoon

at his parents’ house (paras. 78–79)? What part does that setting have in the story’s

conflict?

6. What does the narrator’s statement “My trouble made his real” (para. 174) reveal about his

character? What does it reveal about the nature of empathy?

7. Why do you think Baldwin gave no name to the narrator?

8. According to the narrator—and his mother—how are Sonny and his father similar? What evidence

does the story offer as support? What are the parallels between the narrator and his

mother? What do you think the dash in the last sentence of paragraph 76 says about the narrator?

about Sonny and his father?

9. The story ends in a club where the narrator goes to hear Sonny play. The language of the story

changes, becoming more abstract and metaphorical. What does that change suggest about the

part music plays in the lives of the musicians and what Baldwin wants us to feel about Sonny

and his blues?

10. What do you think is the difference between deep water and drowning (para. 230)? Why do

you think the narrator begins to understand his brother and himself through the way Creole

leads Sonny into the music?

11. What effect does Sonny’s music have on the narrator? Look closely at paragraph 236.

12. The very last line of the story is an allusion to a somewhat enigmatic passage in the Bible

about rage and God’s protection against it. What does the allusion suggest about the glowing

“cup of trembling” the narrator sees in the cup “above [his] brother’s head”?

**“Sonny’s Blues” Multiple-choice Test**

**1. The word “darkness,” used several times in**

**the passage, has all of the following meanings**

**EXCEPT**

a. nighttime

b. sadness

c. skin color

d. death

e. fear

**2. The literary techniques in lines 2–8 of**

**paragraph 78 (“The way I . . . but nobody**

**knows it yet”) transition from**

a. concrete details to figurative language

b. metaphorical language to imagery

c. dramatic irony to personification

d. personification to imagery

e. juxtaposition to alliteration

**3. It is likely that the narrator was**

a. one of the children in the room

b. one of the adults in the room

c. looking in on the scene from the

outside

d. retelling a story his brother told him

e. discussing how his father died

**4. The point of view in the passage changes**

**from**

a. third-person omniscient to thirdperson

limited

b. first person to second person to third

person

c. third person to first person

d. third-person limited to third-person

omniscient

e. first person to second person

**5. The repetition of the word “maybe”**

**suggests**

a. that the narrator has trouble remembering

b. that the narrator has gotten unreliable

secondhand information

c. that the narrator only heard part of the

story because he was half asleep

d. that the narrator is imagining what

others are thinking

e. that the adults in the room have completely

forgotten about the children

**6. “And when light fills the room, the child is**

**filled with darkness” is an example of**

a. oxymoron

b. paradox

c. simile

d. personification e. onomatopoeia

**7. The tone of the passage is best described as**

a. morbidly pessimistic

b. depressingly direct

c. sadly nostalgic

d. deceptively upbeat

e. absentmindedly loving

**8. The narrator says that his last memory of**

**his mother is mixed up with the scene**

**described in the passage. This suggests all**

**of the following EXCEPT that**

a. he felt abandoned by her

b. he felt protected by her

c. he sensed a world from which his parents

could not protect him

d. he associates her with comfort and love

e. she was part of a community of likeminded

people

**9. The word “this” in the first sentence of paragraph**

**79 refers to all of the following EXCEPT**

a. the dark and quiet in the living room

b. the stroking of the child’s hair

c. the presence of the adults

d. the safety and protection of home

e. the jangling beat of a tambourine

**10. Which of the following most clearly**

**expresses the main idea of paragraph 79?**

a. children should be seen and not heard,

as it is the adults who know the most

about jazz

b. children should be protected from the

darkness of war and famine

c. the child feels protected by the darkness

because it is easier to hide

d. the adults want to protect and preserve

the innocence of the children

e. the adults want to conserve energy as

long as they can because they see dark

times ahead

**“The Things They Carried” Questions**

1. The story begins with a paragraph about Jimmy Cross and his relationship with Martha. What

does Martha represent to Cross? Why might it be significant that Cross obsesses about whether

or not she is a virgin? How do Cross’s feelings for Martha change toward the end of the story,

and how does this change point the way to one of the themes of the story?

2. What role does Hollywood play in this story? How are the soldiers’ expectations of war and

death shaped by the movies? Where in this story does Hollywood fantasy meet reality? What

point is O’Brien making?

3. According to the narrator, “The things they carried were largely determined by necessity”

(para. 2), were “partly a function of rank, partly of field specialty” (para. 6), “varied by mission”

(para. 14), and “were determined to some extent by superstition” (para. 28). Which is the

strongest factor in determining what they carried? Do you find any irony in the things they

carried?

4. Jimmy Cross carries “the responsibility for the lives of his men” (para. 7) and ultimately

cannot bear that burden. What does he literally and figuratively shed in order to bear that

weight following Lavender’s death? What point is O’Brien making?

5. Why do you think the medic would need “M&M’s for especially bad wounds” (para. 9)?

6. In paragraph 29, the soldiers find the burned corpse of a teenage Vietcong soldier at the

bottom of a ditch, and Sanders says, “there’s a definite moral here,” before cutting off the boy’s

thumb and giving it to Bowker. Dobbins doesn’t see the moral, and ultimately, they decide,

“There it is.” What do they mean by that? Look at paragraph 75, where O’Brien talks more about

the meaning of that phrase. Does “The Things They Carried” have a moral? If so, what is it?

7. The soldiers react differently to Ted Lavender’s death (paras. 11, 27, 40–64). Pick one soldier

whose reaction seems particularly significant, and explain why you find it meaningful.

8. After studying terminally ill patients, psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross described five stages

in the process of dealing with death: (1) denial, or “this isn’t happening”; (2) anger, or “why

me?”; (3) bargaining, or “I’d do anything”; (4) depression, or “I give up”; and (5) acceptance, or

“It’s okay.” Do the soldiers facing death in this story display these behaviors? Which stages do

you notice, and in what circumstances? Which stage seems most prevalent? Why do you think

that is?

9. In paragraph 77, the narrator says, “They carried the soldier’s greatest fear, which was the

fear of blushing.” Why do you think the soldiers were more afraid to blush than to die?

10. Paragraph 97 says, “It was very sad, [Cross] thought. The things men carried inside. The

things men did or felt they had to do.” What things do you think Cross is thinking about? What

does he intend to do about it? Do you think he will succeed? Do you think it will matter? Explain

your answers.

11. What opinion do you think O’Brien has about the soldiers, the war, and, specifically, Lieutenant

Cross? Support your inferences with specific references to the text.

**Questions on Style and Structure**

1. Paragraph 3 says, “They were called legs or grunts.” Explain why this use of synecdoche

(using a part to refer to the whole) is especially appropriate not only for this story but for life in

the military in general.

2. What evidence do you find that Jimmy Cross is a Christ figure? How does the symbolism of his

name and initials influence your reading of the story? Is the virgin Martha akin to the Virgin

Mary? Explain why or why not.

3. The story’s central event is the death of Ted Lavender, which the story returns to again and

again. Why do you think the story revisits this event so often? Do you think this repetition

honors Lavender or trivializes his death? Explain your answer.

4. The reader learns about Ted Lavender’s death in the second paragraph, but the narrator provides

few details until paragraph 27. What is the effect of the delay on the reader? What does the

delay suggest about the effects of war on the soldiers?

5. How does O’Brien characterize the soldiers by the things they carry?

6. One technique O’Brien employs is zeugma, in which one word has more than one (often

incongruous) object. For example, he writes in paragraph 12, “They carried all they could bear,

and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.” Look for

other examples of zeugma in the story. Do you see any pattern in how O’Brien uses zeugma? In

particular, consider how O’Brien exploits the incongruity of zeugma in order to develop one of

the themes of the story.

7. Paragraph 18 contains a series of questions. Consider all the possible meanings of the statement

“Imagination was a killer.” How does it answer the questions?

8. At the end of paragraph 39, the narrator adds the products of the “great American war chest”

to “the things they carried.” Explain the political statement this extended metaphor makes.

9. How many times does the word “they” appear from paragraphs 65 through 81? (Literally,

count them.) Why does O’Brien use that pronoun so often at the end of the story?

10. In paragraph 99, the conditional “would” is repeated in nearly every sentence. What does

this parallelism suggest? How does it add to the characterization of Lieutenant Cross?