

# Sonnys blues and notes of a native son by james baldwin

Literature



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While politicians and cultural theorists have oftentimes explored questions of race and racism, it is oftentimes the work of poets and authors that capture the subtle psychological details. One of the great 20th century writers in this tradition was James Baldwin. Baldwin explored questions of race in terms of personal relationships and intimate moments of psychological oppression. His work spanned an array of essays and novels, two of the most prominent of which are the fictional work *Sonny's Blues* and the non-fiction work *Notes of a Native Son*. This essay examines these works in terms of elements of comparison, divergence, as well as the means by which Baldwin's experiences contribute to the power of the texts.

In examining these texts the most pervasive element one recognizes is their divergence in form. While *Sonny's Blues* is a narrative, *Notes of a Native Son* is relayed indirect essay format. In these regards, the divergence in form is significant as the fictional account is largely the narrative exemplification of what Baldwin expounds upon in his fictional text. One recognizes that the very title of *Notes of a Native Son* is in part a criticism of Richard Wright's *Native Son* text, as Baldwin considers the depiction of black culture in this work to be overly sensational. Consider Sonny's struggles with heroin and his use of jazz as an outlet for stress in the context of Baldwin's writing in *Notes of a Native Son*, "All over Harlem, Negro boys and girls are growing into stunted maturity, trying desperately to find a place to stand; and the wonder is not that so many are ruined but that so many survive" (Baldwin, p. 71). In these respects, Sonny's life in *Sonny's Blues* converges with Baldwin's non-fiction essay in that rather than using the narrative to overly sensationalizing racism, he implements it as a means of articulating the subtleties of the

African American experience.

When one further considers Baldwin's short story Sonny's Blues it's clear that a great amount of the text is influenced by Baldwin's own experience. From an overarching context, the setting of the story as occurring at times in Harlem and Greenwich Village are directly reflective of Baldwin's own upbringing in these regions. Another prominent comparative element between the fictional text and Baldwin's life is the transitory nature of both Sonny and Baldwin himself. Baldwin is recognized as having spent time in Paris as a means of stepping outside stereotypical depictions of a black writer concerned with racism. In Sonny's Blues, this is also evident as the narrator himself goes abroad to war. In this sense, the short story itself attempts to escape stereotypical notions of racism as a means of demonstrating a deeper reality of the African American experience.