Notes of a Native Son

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BALDWIN

James Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924, in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance. His family was very poor, and he struggled under the cruel treatment of his stepfather (to whom he refers to as his father in *Notes of a Native Son*). As a teenager, Baldwin began to realize he was gay. During this time, he became a junior minister, before abandoning the church at 17. At age 24 he left the United States to live in Paris. He spent most of the rest of his life in France, with periods spent in Switzerland, Turkey, and back in the USA. Over the course of his life he wrote numerous essays, several novels, stories, poetry, and two plays. He is one of the most celebrated African-American authors in history and he played an important role in the Civil Rights/Black Liberation movement of the 1960s. He died of stomach cancer at the age of 63 in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, and was buried in New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Baldwin wrote the book during a time at which the Civil Rights/Black Liberation movements were gathering momentum, in part due to the legacy of the Second World War, which he explores in *Notes of a Native Son*. During the war, many African-American men experienced a taste of the freedom and equality they were denied in American civilian life through their service in the military and travel through Europe. For some African Americans, Europe and other places beyond the United States became a model for a different way of structuring society, one that was not so strictly segregated along racial lines. Grassroots campaigners, along with larger organizations such as the NAACP, began engaging in strategic activism aiming to dismantle Jim Crow and other systems of segregation, end economic exploitation, and secure legal rights for black people. Meanwhile, less organized forms of agitation were also taking place, such as the race riot in Harlem Baldwin describes in the book.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Notes of a Native Son is one of the most important works in the genre of African-American autobiographical criticism, which began with slave narratives in the 18th and 19th century and includes texts such as W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, Malcolm X and Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and—in more recent years—Ta-Nehesi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and Margo Jefferson's *Negroland*. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, although a novel, also drew on Ellison's real-life experience in order to explore the pain and alienation associated with being a black person in 20th-century America. It's also worth noting that the title *Notes of a Native Son* references Richard Wright's canonical work of African-American literature *Native Son*, which Baldwin critiques in an essay in *Notes of a Native Son*. As a cultural critic who draws on personal experience, Baldwin can also be compared to the essayists Joan Didion, Vivian Gornick, and Hilton Als.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Notes of a Native Son*
- **When Written:** 1948-1955
- **Where Written:** New York City, France, and Switzerland
- **When Published:** 1955
- **Literary Period:** 20th century African-American Nonfiction
- **Genre:** Autobiographical Criticism
- **Setting:** USA (particularly Harlem), Paris, and an unnamed village in Switzerland
- **Climax:** When Baldwin throws a glass of water at the waitress in the whites-only restaurant.
- **Antagonist:** The antagonist of the book is not a person, but rather the phenomena of delusion, prejudice, and oppression
- **Point of View:** First person from Baldwin's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Star power. Baldwin was a close friend of several of the most important cultural figures of the 20th century, including Marlon Brando (whom he mentions in the book), Nina Simone, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou.

On the big screen. A documentary about James Baldwin called *I Am Not Your Negro* was released in 2016 and was a major critical and commercial success.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the preface, Baldwin notes that he was initially resistant to the prospect of writing a memoir, but he eventually came to see it as a good opportunity to explore his "inheritance" and identity. In the 30 years since the book was published, there has been little progress on racial matters in American society.

Baldwin was born into a large family in Harlem. He was a keen reader and talented writer from a young age. His writing style was influenced by the literature he read, as well as the rhetoric of the **church** and black American speech. There came a point

in his life when he realized that European culture did not belong to him in the same way it did to white Americans, and this caused him to feel alienated and self-destructive. He explains that he is so critical of America because of his great love for the country, and he concludes that he strives to be "an honest man and a good writer."

In "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin accuses Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of presenting morality in overly simplistic terms. He claims that this makes it a bad novel, more of a "pamphlet" than a piece of literature. People are far more complex in reality than the characters Stowe depicts in the novel. By failing to capture reality, Baldwin argues that protest novels replicate the oppressive conditions that exist in society.

The next essay, "Many Thousands Gone," begins with Baldwin stating that white people have refused to listen to the stories of black Americans. Instead, white people think of African Americans in terms of statistics and stereotypes. Yet the intimacy between the two races means that black people understand white people better than white people understand themselves. Baldwin notes that Richard Wright's *Native Son* is celebrated as the best depiction of black Americans to yet exist, but that the novel falls short due to the fact that it fails to properly depict relationships between black people, as well as the issue that its central character, Bigger Thomas, is ultimately "redeemed" by righteous whites. The novel thus perpetuates the racist idea that in order to become human, black people must assimilate into whiteness.

In the next essay, Baldwin critiques the film *Carmen Jones*, an adaptation of the 19th-century French opera *Carmen* featuring an all-black cast. Baldwin points out that the central and heroic characters are all light-skinned, while the dark-skinned actors play immoral characters. The film also depicts sexuality in a sterilized, childish manner. As a result, *Carmen Jones* tells us more about white people's mindset than it does about actual black people.

Little progress has taken place in Harlem since Baldwin's parents were young. Baldwin criticizes black politicians and the black press, although he reflects that many of the problems of the black media are in fact simply the mirror-image of white publications. He notes that African Americans tend to be very religious, and that there should exist a close relationship between black people and Jews due to the two groups' shared experience of persecution and homelessness, but both groups remain suspicious and prejudiced about one another.

In "Journey to Atlanta," Baldwin explains that black Americans tend to distrust politicians, who never deliver on the promises they make to black communities. Two of Baldwin's brothers sing in a vocal quartet that was recently asked to perform on a Progressive Party tour of Atlanta, and Baldwin's brother David told him all about the trip. The quartet was supposed to perform at churches, after which members of the party would speak to the congregation. However, the quartet actually ended up being conscripted into canvassing, a job for which they were not paid. Eventually, the quartet tried to put on an event where they could sing (and thus earn some money), but a white member of the party, Mrs. Warde, sent black policemen to stop them from performing. The quartet ended up returning to New York shortly after, and Baldwin notes that David was cynically unsurprised by how the trip turned out.

The essay "Notes of a Native Son" begins with the death of Baldwin's father in 1943. The funeral was held on Baldwin's birthday, and that same day a race riot broke out in Harlem. Baldwin's father did not know his own birthday; he was born in New Orleans and moved North in 1919. Baldwin's father, a preacher, was a difficult man with a bad temper who had trouble connecting with others. He suffered from paranoia, and he died after contracting tuberculosis and refusing food (which he believed was poisoned). When Baldwin was young, one of his teachers took an interest in him and supported both the young Baldwin and his family; however, Baldwin's father was resistant to this arrangement, as he didn't trust the teacher because she was white.

Just before his father's death, Baldwin had been denied service in a whites-only restaurant in New Jersey and, filled with rage, he threw a glass of water at the white waitress. He was disturbed by the incident and began to fear that the hatred inside him could lead to his death. While visiting his father during his father's illness, Baldwin again realized that he had been holding onto hatred of his father in order to avoid confronting the pain of losing him. During the funeral, Baldwin hears one of his father's favorite hymns and is suddenly struck by a fond memory of him. After the funeral, the riot starts, and Baldwin reflects on the frustration of people living in the ghetto. He concludes that it is important to accept the reality of life while always being prepared to fight injustice.

In "Encounter on the Seine," Baldwin notes that most African Americans living in **Paris** are studying there on the G.I. Bill. There is tension between black Americans and the many native Africans who move to Paris from French colonies. Baldwin compares the differences between the lives of African expatriates and African-Americans, and the guilt that defines the relationship between these two groups. He reiterates his hope that black Americans will be able to reckon with their heritage, history, and identity.

"A Question of Identity" focuses on the life of American students living in Paris. Baldwin argues that most of these students remain fixated on a stereotypical image of Paris and thus never experience the reality of the city. Parisians themselves tend to not interact with foreigners in the city. Eventually, many Americans are so overwhelmed by the freedom they experience in Paris that they are forced to return to the United States. Some students fully assimilate into French

culture, however Baldwin argues that even these individuals remain saturated in an idea of Paris, not the reality. It is often only through travel to Europe that Americans can get a real understanding of their own country.

A year after moving to Paris, Baldwin meets up with an American tourist whom he had briefly known in New York. Baldwin helps the tourist get a room in his hotel, and the tourist lends him some sheets that he had stolen from his previous hotel. Baldwin ends up getting arrested for possessing these stolen items, and he is taken to a prison 12km outside of Paris. Baldwin has difficulty communicating with the policemen and guards, and he is kept in prison over Christmas. Eventually, he is assisted by an American patent attorney for whom he had previously worked. At Baldwin's trial, people in the courtroom laugh at his story, a fact that makes Baldwin uneasy.

Baldwin begins making yearly trips to a small village in the Swiss mountains, which he is the first black person ever to visit. The little children in the village shout "*Neger! Neger!*" at him as he walks past, and other villagers touch his body out of curiosity. One woman proudly tells him that the village has a tradition of "buying" native Africans in order to convert them to Christianity.

Baldwin reflects that because of the history of imperialism, Europeans are not "strangers" anywhere, yet can maintain a privileged sense of naïveté about black people and racial oppression. He notes that contrary to popular belief, American ideals did not originate in the United States but rather in Europe, and that the most important of these ideals is white supremacy. White Americans remain desperate to go back to a place of "innocence" free of the existence of black people, but clearly this is impossible. The desire for this fantasy of innocence causes great harm in the world, but eventually white people will have to give it up. Baldwin concludes that the world will "never be white again."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

James Baldwin – James Baldwin is the author of the book, and he narrates each essay from his own first-person perspective. Baldwin was born in 1924 to a large, poor family in Harlem, and his strained relationship with his father is a prominent topic in the book. It was Baldwin's talent as a writer and critic that allowed him to escape his difficult upbringing and overcome the many serious obstacles he faced as an impoverished gay black man. As a narrator, Baldwin is unfailingly honest about his own flaws and difficulties, particularly in relation to his journey to make sense of his own identity. Throughout the book, he discusses his struggle to overcome the sense of bitterness and hatred that he argues afflicts all African Americans living in a profoundly unjust, racist world. By interrogating this struggle through writing, Baldwin is not only able to assert control over it, but to also inspire others to do the same.

David Baldwin Sr. (Baldwin's Father) – Baldwin's father, who is never named in the book, is a preacher. Born in New Orleans, he is unsure of his birth date but knows that his mother was alive during slavery. He is a difficult man, consumed by bitterness, anger, and resentment of white people. He has nine children but does not have a particularly close relationship to them. Toward the end of his life, David's family discovers that he suffers from paranoid delusions, and he is committed to a mental hospital. Convinced that people are trying to poison him, he refuses to eat and dies.

David Baldwin Jr. – David is one of Baldwin's nine younger siblings. He sings in a quartet and is invited to perform on a tour hosted by the Progressive Party in Atlanta, which Baldwin details in the essay "Journey to Atlanta." David is both easy-going and cynical, and he is unsurprised when the tour turns out to be a disaster due to the cluelessness and cruelty of white liberals.

American Tourist – The American tourist is an unnamed man Baldwin meets twice in New York who then calls up Baldwin when he arrives in **Paris**. Baldwin and the tourist do not get along very well, but Baldwin still agrees to help the tourist get a room in his hotel. The tourist implicates Baldwin in stealing sheets from his former hotel, leading both of them to spend over a week in prison.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Emma Berdis Jones (Baldwin's Mother) – Baldwin's mother is also not named in the book. Little information is given about her, although it is clear that Baldwin has an easier relationship with her than with his father. She encourages Baldwin's writing and interacts with visitors to the household because her husband is too short-tempered.

Harriet Beecher Stowe – Harriet Beecher Stowe was a white writer and abolitionist. She was born in Connecticut in 1811 and was the author of the 1852 anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which Baldwin critiques in the essay entitled "Everybody's Protest Novel."

Richard Wright – Richard Wright was an African-American author born in Mississippi in 1908. Known as one of the most important (and controversial) black writers of the 20th century, he was the author of *Native Son*, which Baldwin critiques in "Many Thousands Gone."

Pearl Bailey – Pearl Bailey was an African-American actress and singer. She played the character of Frankie, a "floozie," in the 1954 film *Carmen Jones*. In his essay on the film, Baldwin praises her performance.

Dorothy Dandridge – Dorothy Dandridge was an African-American actress who played the lead role in *Carmen Jones*, a

performance for which she became the first African-American woman to be nominated for an Oscar.

Harry Belafonte – Harry Belafonte is an African-American singer and actor who played the male lead in *Carmen Jones*.

Mr. Clarence Warde – Mr. Clarence Warde is a black merchant seaman who helps arrange the quartet's tour of Atlanta. He is rather hapless and fails to resolve the many problems that occur during the tour.

Mrs. Price – Mrs. Price is an older white woman who works for the Progressive Party. She treats the quartet rudely during their time in Atlanta, and seems to have a patronizing attitude toward black people.

Baldwin's Teacher – Baldwin's teacher is a young white woman who takes an interest in Baldwin and offers to take him to the theatre after reading one of his plays. She also supports Baldwin's family after his father loses his job.

Baldwin's Aunt – Baldwin's aunt is a severe woman who was very beautiful in her youth. She criticizes Baldwin and argues fiercely with Baldwin's father, who was her younger brother. Baldwin reflects that she probably had the most genuine relationship with his father of anyone in the family.

American Patent Attorney – The patent attorney is Baldwin's former employer. Baldwin manages to inform the attorney when he is imprisoned, and the attorney assists in getting him released.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

INHERITANCE, TRADITION, AND BELONGING

Throughout the book, Baldwin explores the fraught senses of inheritance and belonging among African Americans. Baldwin argues that black Americans' relationship to their own country and heritage is unlike that of any other people in the world because "his past was taken from him, almost literally, at one blow." Because of the systematic erasure of African traditions and black family relationships during slavery (and in the decades after), African Americans have been denied a tie to their own ancestry. At the same time, the intense racism that continues to dominate life in the United States means that African Americans are also made to feel alienated in the only country that they can truly call home. Baldwin explores his own ambivalent and highly critical feelings about America throughout the book, while simultaneously making it indisputably clear that "Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny."

Baldwin explores the idea of inheritance in an immediate, personal context through the essays about family and, in particular, his father. Baldwin's difficult relationship with his father is parallel with his difficult relationship with America, even though these two relationships are also very different. Baldwin's highly charged connections to both his country and his father make it hard for him to access the feelings of rootedness, assurance, and identity that are associated with national belonging and familial heritage. He argues that people's "origins… contain the key––could we but find it––to all that we later become." Just as Baldwin must make peace with his father posthumously in order to move forward with his life, the United States must reckon with its history of genocide, slavery, and racism in order to build a better future.

Baldwin further illustrates the uniqueness of African Americans' relationship to their heritage by placing his own experience in a variety of distinct contexts. For example, he compares his sense of identity with that of the African men he encounters living in **Paris**. "The African before him has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but the African has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from his people and his past. His mother did not sing 'Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.'" He also contrasts the black American experience with that of Jewish people living in the United States. Although there are parallels between African-American and Jewish history and culture, the overall structure of white supremacy encourages these two groups of people to be antagonistic toward each other. Baldwin suggests that black people are hostile to Jews as a kind of proxy for white gentiles: "It is not the Jewish tradition by which [the black American] has been betrayed but the tradition of his native land. But just as a society must have a scapegoat, so hatred must have a symbol." This statement suggests that it often too difficult for black Americans to directly confront the fact that they have been excluded and persecuted by their own "native land." As a result, they direct their resentment elsewhere.

The book can be read as an effort to help change the sense of homelessness and marginalization that plagues the African American experience. Baldwin notes that racism has meant that many African-American cultural traditions—such as the black literary canon—are denigrated as being less significant or sophisticated than their white equivalents: "The fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate." His critiques of novels, cinema, and politics that pertain to the African-American people are an attempt to give a sense of coherence and solidity to African-American culture. At the same time, he is merciless in his criticism, arguing that there should be high standards for the way that black people are represented in society and culture.

Of course, the book itself is a highly important item in the African-American cultural canon, and it is clear that Baldwin wrote it in the hope that this would be the case. He states: "I was trying to locate myself within a specific inheritance and to use that inheritance, precisely, to claim the birthright from which that inheritance had so brutally and specifically excluded me." In recording his pursuit of cultural tradition and "inheritance" in writing, Baldwin deliberately shapes the trajectory of black American culture, heritage, and identity. He proposes that although African Americans have been uniquely stripped of their sense of belonging and inheritance, it is within their power to assert their own identity and traditions as significant in their own right, as well as within the larger context of American culture overall.

LANGUAGE, NARRATIVE, AND TRUTH

As a writer, Baldwin is preoccupied with the power of language and stories. He is particularly interested in the way in which language can be used to convey the truth lying beneath superficial and misleading ideas about the world. He argues that "Every legend… contains its residuum of truth, and the root function of language is to control the universe by describing it." With this statement, Baldwin proposes that existing narratives can contain kernels of truth, but that it is only by understanding the power and importance of language that this truth can be drawn out.

One of the most important recurring ideas in the book is the notion that black Americans have been restricted from telling their own stories, and that it is vitally necessary that these stories be told and heard. "It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear." In this argument, Baldwin isolates two separate problems surrounding black peoples' ability to control their own narratives. On one hand, there have been few opportunities for black people to tell their own stories; on the other, there is a resistance among white people to believe these stories and take them seriously. Throughout American history, the power of narration has been almost exclusively in the hands of white people. (This can be traced all the way back to the banning of African languages under slavery and the denigration of African-American English dialects, which Baldwin explores in his essay on *Carmen Jones*.) Baldwin proposes a sense of dual responsibility when it comes to the future of narrative control: black people must tell their stories truthfully, and white people must be prepared to listen.

At the same time, Baldwin does not suggest that conveying the truth through language and storytelling is a simple matter. One of the most important and distinctive attributes of Baldwin's writing is his emphasis on complexity and ambiguity. He argues: "It is part of the business of the writer––as I see it––to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source." For Baldwin, this does not just mean exposing blatant untruths. It also means pushing through every oversimplified, misleading, or clichéd ideas in order to uncover the complex and difficult reality lying beneath.

One of the ways that Baldwin explores the difficulty and complexity of communication is through his account of his time in France. When he gets arrested, Baldwin misunderstands what the French authorities say to him—not because he doesn't comprehend the literal meaning of the words, but because, as a non-native speaker, he doesn't have access to the full nuance and complexity of the way French is used. Similarly, when he is in the village in Switzerland, the children shout "*Neger!*" at him as he walks passed. Although the sound of this word is deeply painful, Baldwin also reminds himself that it has a different meaning in a Swiss village than it would have in America. He argues that by shouting "*Neger*," the Swiss children are really identifying him as a stranger. In America, when white children shout "Nigger," it does not mean "stranger" but is rather an explicit racial insult intended to reinforce the lower status of black people within white supremacy. The fact that the meaning of language changes in different cultural contexts confirms the importance of historical specificity, and the idea that people's "inheritance"—whether linguistic, cultural, or historical—is vital to understanding who they are.

Baldwin also examines silence as an oppositional force to the power of language and narrative. He claims that "as is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence; and the story is told, compulsively, in symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics." Baldwin's advocacy for breaking through this silence through language and storytelling, then, is an attempt at liberation and accessing truth. However, he also considers that there can be powerful forms of silence that stand in opposition to false and incomplete narratives: "Society is held together by our need; we bind it together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into that void, within which, like the earth before the Word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden." Here Baldwin suggests that it might even be necessary to confront the "void" of a language-less, story-less silence in order to access the truth. At the very least, it is vital that people do not cling to false narratives in order to insulate themselves against this silence. Through constructing his own narrative, which honors the power of language and complexity of truth, Baldwin does his own part to rectify the problem of false stories.

PROGRESS VS. STAGNATION

Much of the book is colored by a sense of disappointment and resentment at how little

progress has taken place in the world, despite the superficial appearance of change. Baldwin illustrates this idea with the French phrase: "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*," meaning "The more things change, the more they stay the same." This statement is crucial to understanding Baldwin's view of progress and stagnation. He admits that there has been much change in society, and that there are many signs that suggest racial progress is taking place. However, these superficial indications belie the reality that the fundamental issues of white supremacy, inequality, and prejudice remain in place. Baldwin argues: "In America, it is true, the appearance is perpetually changing, each generation greeting with short-lived exultation yet more dazzling additions to our renowned façade. But the ghetto, anxiety, bitterness, and guilt continue to breed their indescribable complex of tensions." This statement suggests that the superficial appearance of progress may in fact worsen existing problems by deepening the feelings of bitterness and guilt among black people who have been told that things are improving, yet who do not see evidence of this progress.

Baldwin explores the bitterness that exists among many black people, treating it as symptomatic of the enduring oppression that they face. He notes that it is common to hear residents of the black neighborhood Sugar Hill complain: "Our people never get anywhere." Similarly, he explores the widespread distrust of politicians (both white and black) that exists within African-American communities. Baldwin notes that sometimes people get excited about hearing the politicians' promises of progress, but that most of the time they are predisposed to believe these promises will amount to nothing. Of course, this sense of bitterness and pessimism is a distinct contrast to the conventional narratives around American people and the American dream. Particularly at the time Baldwin is writing, the United States is widely considered to be a land of hope, ambition, and belief in progress. Yet his writing suggests that such sentiments are at odds with the experience of black Americans. Ever since the abolition of slavery, African Americans have lived in hope that their country will transform into a fair and welcoming place, yet this hope continues to be dashed.

At the same time, Baldwin shows that the same stagnation of racial progress that plagues the United States also takes place in Europe. In "Stranger in the Village," he notes that it doesn't matter how many times he returns to the small village in Switzerland: he will always be a stranger there, simply because of the fact that he is black. On the other hand, Baldwin also uses this essay to emphasize the fact that, as elusive as progress may prove to be, it is impossible for the United States to reverse back into a time of "white innocence." By this, he means that certain racist white Americans seem to harbor a longing for a (mythical) time at which the white population simply had no contact with people from other races—as is true in the village in Switzerland before Baldwin arrives. Yet unlike in parts of Europe, this fiction of white nationalism was never true in the United States. In this sense, racists' desire for a purely white nation and progressives' desire for racial equality have created a situation of stagnation, with both sides working against each other and thus maintaining a form of limbo. Baldwin stresses that only once people accept that "this world is white no longer, and it will never be white again," will this stasis be broken and true progress be achieved.

PREJUDICE, DISHONESTY, AND DELUSION

Baldwin's emphasis on expressing truth through language is a direct rejection of dishonesty and delusion, which he shows to be major components of the system of white supremacy. One example of this dishonesty comes in the form of derogatory myths and stereotypes about black people, which have been used to justify racist oppression. Baldwin critiques the ways in which these negative ideas can be present within cultural representations of black people, such as Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* and the 1955 film *Carmen Jones*. He argues that *Native Son* is trapped by the "American image of Negro life," meaning that even though its author is a black man, the novel nonetheless recreates a dishonest and delusional understanding of black people, rather than showing black life "as a continuing and complex group reality." Baldwin further explains this by arguing that "the [white] American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro's heart; and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality." African Americans internalize lies and delusions about themselves that originate from a white racist mentality. It is only through examining these falsehoods that black people can be portrayed—and portray themselves—fairly and truthfully.

In his critique of *Carmen Jones*, Baldwin similarly accuses the film of creating a dishonest impression of African Americans. He writes that the characters "could easily have been dreamed up by someone determined to prove that Negroes are as 'clean' and as 'modern' as white people and, I suppose, in one way or another, that is exactly how they were dreamed up." Even though the "cleaned up" characters do not explicitly convey the negative stereotype that black people are dirty, the very fact that they are "cleaned up" in the first place plays into the logic of this racist myth. Baldwin emphasizes the idea that *Carmen Jones* is beholden to racist delusions by repeating the phrase "dreamed up," thereby underlining the fact that the characters in the film are disconnected from the reality of African-American people.

Baldwin does suggest that racist stereotypes are no longer taken as truth, arguing: "Today, to be sure, we know that the Negro is not biologically or mentally inferior; there is no truth in those rumors of his body odor or his incorrigible sexuality; or no more truth than can be easily explained or even defended by

the social sciences." At first glance, this statement appears to be a little over-optimistic. While it is true that scientists and many others understand that the myths he mentions are not grounded in reality, it is still the case that many racists cling to these ideas and insist on asserting them as truth. However, by presenting his argument in this way, Baldwin refuses to take such delusional thinking seriously. Baldwin's "we" in the phrase "we know that the Negro is not biologically or mentally inferior" emphasizes that he is not willing to discuss race in a way that legitimizes racist delusions.

At the same time, Baldwin proposes that it is not just overtly negative myths and lies that are harmful to black people. He is notably critical of sentimentality, arguing that it is a form of dishonesty that inhibits true progress. This argument is especially important to Baldwin's critique of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which he argues fails as a novel because it reduces the complex reality of the world into easy moral categories. Not only does sentimentality oversimplify the truth, it also creates a false sense of comfort and assurance about the reality of the United States. Baldwin is similarly critical of false beliefs in white innocence, pointing out that "American white men still nourish the illusion that there is some means of recovering the European innocence, of returning to a state in which black men do not exist." As indicated in the "Progress vs. Stagnation" theme, this delusion of a possible return to a mythical, innocent past inhibits the march of progress. It is only through rejecting all forms of dishonesty and delusion—both seemingly positive (sentimentality) and negative (racist stereotypes)—that there can be any hope of a better future.

INTIMACY VS. HATRED

Many people believe that racism is solely a form of hatred, and that in racist societies white people exist in a relationship of alienation and hatred to racially oppressed peoples. However, in *Notes of a Native Son* Baldwin contends that intimacy is, in fact, also a part of racism, and that intimacy and hatred often coexist. One of Baldwin's major arguments is that, rather than being a superfluous or compartmentalized group, African Americans are a fundamental part of American history, culture, society, and identity. The United States would not exist as it does today without African Americans, and it does not make sense to think of white America without simultaneously thinking of black people. White and black Americans thus have an inextricable connection that in some ways resembles a kinship relation. Baldwin writes: "It is not simply the relationship of oppressed to oppressor, of master to slave, nor is it motivated merely by hatred; it is also, literally and morally, a blood relationship, perhaps the most profound reality of the American experience, and we cannot begin to unlock it until we accept how very much it contains of the force and anguish and terror of love."

Importantly, the fact that love and intimacy exist alongside hatred does not make the hatred any less severe. The book is filled with examples of intense hatred which are in no way mitigated by the intimacy that is sometimes also present at the same time. Indeed, Baldwin explores this idea in more detail through the microcosm of his family. Baldwin harbors feelings of hatred for his father which are made *more* rather than less intense by the fact that they are family. Baldwin is inextricably tied to his father and has particular hopes and expectations for their relationship that he would not have for someone to whom he was not related. Yet the difficulty of his relationship with his father is intensified by these expectations, rather than being eased by them.

While white people's hatred of black people may be the most obvious example of hatred in a racist society, Baldwin also explores black people's feelings of hatred at length. For example, he argues that black people identify with Jews, yet also resent and distrust them, and even come to hate Jews *because* of their identification with them: "When the Negro hates the Jew as a Jew he does so partly because the nation does and in much the same painful fashion that he hates himself." Once again, hatred and intimacy coexist, making the experience of hatred even more severe. Baldwin also shows that a lifetime of being disappointed and mistreated by white people creates a bitterness in African Americans. This is illustrated in the following interaction between Baldwin and his father: "He became more explicit and warned me that my white friends in high school were not really my friends and that I would see, when I was older, how white people would do anything to keep a Negro down. Some of them could be nice, he admitted, but none of them were to be trusted and most of them were not even nice." Note that Baldwin's father does not warn his son about racist strangers or bullies, but rather about his *friends*. Again, the coexistence of intimacy and hatred is shown to make racist hatred even more painful.

While Baldwin is sympathetic to the reasons why black people become suspicious and hateful toward white people, he makes a strong case against giving in to this hate on the grounds that it is self-destructive. After Baldwin throws the glass of water at the white waitress, he reflects: "My life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart." Note that Baldwin doesn't feel regret because he pities the waitress, but rather because he knows that continuing to harbor such intense feelings of hatred will ultimately only harm him, and may even lead to his death. Elsewhere, he argues: "I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain." Overall, Baldwin implies that it is more important (and prudent) to deal with this pain than to let one's hatred fester, because that hatred has deadly consequences.

Despite emphasizing the coexistence of hatred and intimacy, Baldwin also proposes that there can (and should) be love and

intimacy that flourish without hatred. However, he does not suggest that love is the only answer to racism, or even that love for white people is a realistic feeling for black people to access. He argues: "In order really to hate white people, one has to blot so much out of the mind––and the heart––that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose. But this does not mean, on the other hand, that love comes easily: the white world is too powerful, too complacent, too ready with gratuitous humiliation, and, above all, too ignorant and too innocent for that." Ultimately, Baldwin emphasizes that black people must rid themselves of hatred as a form of protection against the self-destructiveness that hatred causes. This does not mean that love for white people will automatically follow, yet this matters less than the fact that letting go of hatred will allow black people to love themselves.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CHURCH

Christianity plays an important role in the book, in part because it is a significant part of Baldwin's family and upbringing—Baldwin's father was a preacher, and Baldwin spent his teenage years as a junior preacher before leaving both his home and the church. Baldwin's view of the church is ambivalent, and his views on Christianity reflect his interest (apparent in much of his art and cultural criticism) in the complexity and ambiguity of culture. On the one hand, Baldwin sees the church as embodying many of his least favorite aspects of society: dishonesty, delusion, falsehood, hypocrisy, and artifice. To Baldwin, one of the most significant Christian hypocrisies (which he details in his essay "Stranger in the Village) is Christianity's role in colonialism and the terrorization of enslaved people in the United States. On the other hand, Baldwin does also highlight ways in which Christianity can be a source of strength, empowerment, and identity for African Americans. At his father's funeral, Baldwin is moved by the preacher's words of forgiveness and by hearing one of his father's favorite songs, which evokes a fond memory of sitting on his father's lap in church. Baldwin also illustrates the extent to which the church—despite having given moral cover to brutal colonial regimes that destroyed African and African American lives—provides a structural foundation for black communities who have little political or economic power. Baldwin shows that the church itself is not overall an intrinsically positive or negative institution, but rather one that can be used to both just and unjust ends. This view seems to be of a piece with Baldwin's writing on art and culture in general: he is always committed to looking at the specifics and the context of work of art or cultural phenomenon, rather than allowing that thing to be reduced through sweeping analysis.

PARIS

As detailed in the essay "Equal in Paris," Baldwin leaves the United States for Paris at the age of 24 with only $40 to his name and no knowledge of French language or culture. In doing so, he follows in a major 20th-century tradition of American writers expatriating to Paris in order to indulge in the relatively cheaper standard of living, rich cultural history, and social freedoms that could be found there. At the same time, Baldwin's experience of Paris does not follow the example set by white American writers such as Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Ernest Hemingway. For Baldwin, Paris is a place in which his own understanding of America and American identity is thrown into relief in a painful manner—Paris is where Baldwin confronts what it means to be a black American. The distance that Paris provides from his homeland, and the new cultural context of being in a city full of Africans (as opposed to African Americans), sheds light for Baldwin on the historical and cultural complexity of the United States, and on the psychology of those who leave the United States for Europe seeking a seductive myth of Parisian freedom. This myth is shown to be specifically inapplicable to Baldwin, who finds himself wrongfully imprisoned for eight days, though Baldwin insists that Parisian freedom as white Americans imagine it isn't real either. At the same time, Baldwin is also affirmed and matured by his experiences in Paris—he becomes a better writer, and he gains perspective that allows him to create an enduring essay collection at a very young age. Paris, then, is a symbol of using distance to gain perspective. By escaping his home country and adapting to a completely different environment, Baldwin develops a better understanding of himself and of the world around him.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Beacon Press edition of *Notes of a Native Son* published in 2012.

Preface to the 1984 Edition Quotes

I had to try to describe that particular condition which was––is––the living proof of my inheritance. And, at the same time, with that very same description, I had to claim my birthright. I am what time, circumstance, history have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that. So are we all.

The conundrum of color is the inheritance of every American, be he/she legally or actually Black or White... I was trying to locate myself within a specific inheritance and to use that inheritance, precisely, to claim the birthright from which that inheritance had so brutally and specifically excluded me.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xx

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has been explaining how he came to write *Notes of a Native Son*. He had not thought of himself as an essayist and he worried that he was too young to publish a memoir, but he was nonetheless eager to explore a sense of his own identity through writing. Here, he frames this goal as an effort to come to terms with his own inheritance while also locating himself within the broader inheritance of America at large. For Baldwin, the "inheritance" of history and national identity is a weighty matter. People must be able to claim their "birthright" in order to move through the world, and everyone is inevitably shaped by the history that preceded them. Furthermore, white people must accept their inheritance of "the conundrum of color," the legacy of racial violence and oppression that is foundational to America.

On the other hand, Baldwin also notes that people's lives are not entirely determined by their circumstances. Everyone has the ability to move beyond the dictates of the world into which they were born and shape their own lives to some degree. However, the implication of this passage is that in order to take control over one's destiny, it is important to fully reckon with one's inheritance.

There have been superficial changes, with results at best ambiguous and, at worst, disastrous. Morally, there has been no change at all and the moral change is the only real one. "*Plus ça change*," groan the exasperated French (who should certainly know), "*plus c'est le même chose*." (The more it changes, the more it remains the same.) At least they have the style to be truthful about it.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xx

Explanation and Analysis

Having explained his desire to explore his "inheritance" through writing, Baldwin notes that disappointingly little has changed in the 30 years between the time at which he wrote the book and the time at which he is writing the new edition's preface. In this passage, he meditates on the French saying, "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*" The idea that superficial progress masks fundamental consistency/stagnation is central to Baldwin's theory of social change.

On the surface, much has changed between the 1940s-50s (when he wrote *Notes of a Native Son*) and 1984 when he writes the preface. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements have theoretically revolutionized the landscape of race relations in the United States; yet here Baldwin challenges this assumption. Although American society may look different in the 1980s than it did 30 years prior, he suggests that this is simply a case of deceptive appearances. Meanwhile, his comment that the French are at least "truthful" about this lack of progress is a subtle indictment of American denial and dishonesty.

Autobiographical Notes Quotes

But it is part of the business of the writer––as I see it––to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source. From this point of view the Negro problem is nearly inaccessible. It is not only written about so widely; it is written about so badly. It is quite possible to say that the price a Negro pays for becoming articulate is to find himself, at length, with nothing to be articulate about. ("You taught me language," says Caliban to Prospero, "and my profit on't is I know how to curse.")

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has reflected on the different factors that influence his writing style, and lamented the fact that being a black writer is burdened by the writing that already exists on "the

Negro problem," meaning the problem of race relations in the United States. In this passage, he argues that writing on "the Negro problem" is generally bad, and he hints that this is because there has thus far not been room within English language and literature for a proper articulation of racial issues and black subjectivity.

Baldwin presents this argument in a subtle manner, and thus it is easy to misconstrue his meaning. When he claims that "the price a Negro pays for becoming articulate is to find himself… with nothing to be articulate about," this does not mean that black people are unintelligent or not skilled at communication. Rather, he is alluding to the fact that the language and literature black Americans have inherited is that of their oppressors. White Americans' modes of expression were not built to incorporate black personhood, as through most of American history white people have consistently strived to deny black people's humanity. This point is made clear by Baldwin's citation of an exchange between Caliban and Prospero from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In the play, Caliban is an (assumedly black) "savage" who is enslaved by the exiled Duke of Milan, Prospero. In the line Baldwin quotes, Caliban protests that the only use he has for the language Propsero has taught him is to curse in complaint about his miserable life.

> I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use––I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe. I would have to appropriate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine––I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme––otherwise I would have no place in any scheme. What was the most difficult was the fact that I was forced to admit something I had always hidden from myself, which the American Negro has had to hide from himself as the price of his public progress; that I hated and feared white people.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has discussed the widespread difficulty in America of writing about "the Negro problem," which in part stems from people's desire to avoid looking at the past. He has then described his own painful reckoning with the fact that the aspects of Western culture which he loves and treasures ("Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt") do not belong to him in the same way as they belong to people of European descent. In this passage, he explains that he must acknowledge this detachment while finding a way to make "these white centuries" his own. This is necessary because, as a black American, Baldwin is uniquely cut off from his own ancestral heritage and was born into a country and culture that rejects him on account of his race.

For Baldwin, finding away to "appropriate" white culture in order to develop a sense of his own inheritance and identity requires acknowledging his hatred and fear of white people. At first this might seem paradoxical; if Baldwin is seeking a way to claim white culture, why should he admit to or even embrace his negative feelings about white people? Throughout the book, however, Baldwin insists on the importance of honesty and truth. Understanding his relationship to European culture requires him to differentiate between this culture and people in order to clarify his feelings to himself.

> I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin wraps up the "Autobiographical Note" by describing his interests along with things he doesn't like. This statement, which is taken from the penultimate paragraph of the essay, is one of the most famous lines in all of Baldwin's work. It emphasizes the fact that Baldwin's critiques come out of a place of love rather than hatred, which illustrates the close coexistence of love and hatred.

There is also a level of ambiguity in the phrase; although Baldwin loves America "more than any other country in the world," this could be evidence of Baldwin's disconnection from other countries rather than enthusiasm about America. However, this quotation is important to bear in mind, particularly in the later essays in the book when Baldwin is discussing his experiences in France. Although France clearly has a great impact on him (and is the country where he chooses to spend most of his life), on some level he maintains emotional loyalty to the country of his birth.

I want to be an honest man and a good writer.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final line of the Autobiographical Note. Baldwin has explained that he is suspicious of "theories" and that he believes his greatest duty is to "get my work done." This statement contains the two qualities that Baldwin appears to believe are most important: honesty and dedication to his work. It also emphasizes the way in which they are related; for Baldwin, the desire to be a good writer is intrinsically linked to honesty and, more broadly, to moral virtue. Baldwin holds that writing and writers serve an important role in society precisely because they expose dishonesty and delusion and, in this way, contribute to the eradication of prejudice and oppression.

Everybody's Protest Novel Quotes

Society is held together by our need; we bind it together with legend, myth, coercion, fearing that without it we will be hurled into that void, within which, like the earth before the Word was spoken, the foundations of society are hidden. From this void––ourselves––it is the function of society to protect us; but it is only this void, our unknown selves, demanding, forever, a new act of creation, which can save us––"from the evil that is in the world."

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

In his critique of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Baldwin has protested that Stowe uses an oversimplified story and characters in order to convey an equally simplistic moral message. He has argued that reality is far more complicated than she depicts and that it is irresponsible for novelists to betray this complexity. In this passage, he discusses the way in which people project false narratives and meanings onto the world in order to avoid the "void" that exists before/without language. In doing so, Baldwin invokes the Biblical idea that nothingness existed before the Word, through which God created the universe.

It may seem ironic that Baldwin, a writer who stresses the importance of conveying truth through language, should argue against "legend" and "myth" in favor of a wordless void wherein the truth lies. However, closer inspection of this passage shows that Baldwin believes writing should be "a new act of creation" that comes out of this void, rather than words that ignore the void in favor of pre-existing false narratives. Only through embracing the void of the unknown and unexpressed can we access the truth.

Many Thousands Gone Quotes

It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear. As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence; and the story is told, compulsively, in symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics; it is revealed in Negro speech and in that of the white majority and in their different frames of reference... The story of the Negro in America is the story of America––or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a very pretty story: the story of a people is never very pretty.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This is the opening paragraph of "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin's essay about Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. In this passage, Baldwin returns to the idea that black Americans have been prohibited from telling their own stories by white people who are resistant to listen. However, Baldwin also questions the idea that white people can simply choose not to hear black people's stories. Although white people may wish to claim that African-American narratives are separate (and superfluous) to American culture as a whole, Baldwin contends that "the story of the Negro is the story of America."

There is no American history, culture, or identity without blackness, despite white people's determination to excise black people from their image of themselves. Due to this inescapable fact, white Americans will not be able understand themselves, their nation, or their future without listening to black people's stories.

> Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has argued that the "story of the Negro is the story of America," and he laments the fact that white Americans have chosen not to listen to this story. Instead, whites think of black people only as a "social problem" to be discussed through statistics and descriptions of poverty and crime. In this quotation, Baldwin reiterates his point that America as a whole must stop thinking of black people as alien and separate from the rest of the country and acknowledge that racist oppression undermines white American identity, as well as African Americans. This is a crucial point within Baldwin's overall theory of national identity and heritage.

However, note the rather strange phrasing Baldwin employs in this quotation. He claims that "*Our* dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from *our* dehumanization of *ourselves*," suggesting that he is not only addressing a white audience, but he is also himself speaking from a white perspective. This is not the only point in the book in which Baldwin adopts this seemingly white position, and it is one of the aspects of his writing for which he is most fiercely criticized. It is possible that by using "our" and "ourselves" Baldwin is not assuming a white identity, but rather an American identity that is not racially specified. However, even if this is the case it is clear that he is distancing himself from "the Negro" even as he is also arguing against the dehumanization of black people. Unsurprisingly, this has struck some black critics as a kind of betrayal.

> We cannot escape our origins, however hard we try those origins which contain the key––could we but find it––to all that we later become. What it means to be a Negro is a good deal more than this essay can discover; what it means to be a Negro in America can perhaps be suggested by an examination of the myths we perpetuate about him.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has argued that Americans no longer believe in many racist myths about black people, such as the idea that black people are biologically destined to be unintelligent. However, he has maintained that there still remains a lack of understanding about what it means to be a black American. In this passage, he reemphasizes his argument that "origins" and inheritance play a fundamentally important role, not only in people's conception of themselves, but also to their present and future lives.

Under one interpretation, Baldwin seems to be arguing for a determinist view of the world, meaning the belief that people's history and circumstances shape and decide their futures. However, the rest of the book suggests that Baldwin does not advocate a strict determinist position, but is more focused on examining the way in which people's inheritance dictates their sense of their own identity.

This passage also contains an important exploration of the possible uses of myth and delusion. While Baldwin identifies the danger of false ideas and narratives, here he suggests that we can look to these falsities as evidence to help us understand black American identity. This does not mean that myths about black people contain an accurate impression of what black people are actually like, but rather that they teach us about the position of black people in America. By understanding what is false, we can begin to understand what is true.

> *Native Son* does not convey the altogether savage paradox of the American Negro's situation, of which the social reality which we prefer with such hopeful superficiality to study is but, as it were, the shadow. It is not simply the relationship of oppressed to oppressor, of master to slave, nor is it motivated merely by hatred; it is also, literally and morally, a blood relationship, perhaps the most profound reality of the American experience, and we cannot begin to unlock it until we accept how very much it contains of the force and anguish and terror of love.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

This is the end of Baldwin's critique of Richard Wright's

Native Son. Baldwin has argued that the novel does not go far enough in illustrating the "monstrosity" that can be produced through racist oppression, and he has lamented the fact that the novel's central character, Bigger, is ultimately "redeemed" by righteous white people. This quotation is crucial to understanding Baldwin's theory of the relationship of white and black Americans, a relationship he contends is defined by the coexistence of intimacy and hatred. Baldwin argues that it is over-simplistic and false to understand the relationship of white people to black people as one defined purely by hatred and oppression.

This is not because hatred is not an important or relevant aspect of the relationship, but because focusing only on hatred denies the intimacy that has also defined interracial relations. Crucially, Baldwin does not propose that intimacy and hatred are oppositional, but rather that they work together. The intimacy that white people may sense with black people could, in fact, intensify racial oppression, in much the same way that the "blood relationship" between family members makes their feelings about each other more intense.

The Harlem Ghetto Quotes

❝ It seems unlikely that within this complicated structure any real and systematic cooperation can be achieved between Negroes and Jews. (This is in terms of the over-all social problem and is not meant to imply that individual friendships are impossible or that they are valueless when they occur.) The structure of the American commonwealth has trapped both these minorities into attitudes of perpetual hostility. They do not dare trust each other––the Jew because he feels he must climb higher on the American social ladder and has, so far as he is concerned, nothing to gain from identification with any minority even more unloved than he; while the Negro is in the even less tenable position of not really daring to trust anyone.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has argued that there are significant similarities between black people and Jews, who share experiences of persecution and diaspora, but that there are also powerful factors that prevent both groups from forming alliances with one another. In this passage, he further explains this point, arguing that black and Jewish individuals may occasionally form friendships, but that the overall structure of white supremacy in the United States prohibits a broader alliance forming between these two marginalized groups.

This point further emphasizes Baldwin's examination of the relationship between intimacy and hatred. African Americans and Jews share a kind of intimacy due to their similar history and positioning within the nation, but this intimacy in turn breeds hatred (or at least severe distrust) between the two populations. This passage also highlights the way in which racism as a broad and multifaceted phenomenon works to drive people of different (non-white) races apart.

Notes of a Native Son Quotes

❝ I felt, in the oddest, most awful way, that I had somehow betrayed him. I lived it over and over and over again, the way one relives an automobile accident after it has happened and one finds oneself alone and safe. I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

In a moment of rage brought about by being denied service in a whites-only diner, Baldwin has thrown a glass of water at a waitress and been forced to flee the scene. His white friend assisted him by pointing the police and angry mob in the wrong direction, and in this passage Baldwin expresses his painful and contradictory feelings in the wake of this incident. He feels that he has "betrayed" his friend, and is simultaneously alarmed by his own capacity (and desire) for violence, which he fears could cost him his life. The intimacy Baldwin feels for his friend is thus contrasted with the intense hatred he harbors about white people in general, particularly those who are complicit in racist segregation and oppression.

This passage also underlines Baldwin's argument that hatred—even well-founded hatred—inevitably harms the person who hates, perhaps even more than the object of

hate. He fears that his own hatred will destroy him, not only because of the negative impact it will have on his psyche but also through the very practical fear that he will violently harm a white person, which would lead to his death. Once again, Baldwin shows that the survival and future of black people is implicated in the survival and future of white people, often in unexpected ways.

The Negro's real relation to the white American...prohibits, simply, anything as uncomplicated and satisfactory as pure hatred. In order really to hate white people, one has to blot so much out of the mind––and the heart––that this hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose. But this does not mean, on the other hand, that love comes easily: the white world is too powerful, too complacent, too ready with gratuitous humiliation, and, above all, too ignorant and too innocent for that. One is absolutely forced to make perpetual qualifications and one's own reactions are always canceling each other out.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has discussed the race riot that occurred on the day of his father's funeral. He has argued that the rage and powerlessness felt by people in the ghetto means that riots are somewhat inevitable, while also pointing out that this rage is somewhat misdirected and becomes self-destructive rather than an assault on the oppressors. In this passage, he discusses the complexity of the relationship between white and black people, arguing that black people do not simply hate white people, but rather feel a complex mix of emotions that in some senses cancel each other out, creating confusion that prevents progress from taking place.

Once again, Baldwin shows intimacy and hatred to be closely related, and he argues that this relationship can be difficult and painful to deal with. If black people felt only hatred or only love toward white people, then change could take place more quickly. Instead, they remain stuck in a precarious balance of self-defeating emotions, which in turn causes them great harm.

Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown Quotes

The African before him has endured privation, injustice, medieval cruelty; but the African has not yet endured the utter alienation of himself from––his people and his past. His mother did not sing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," and he has not, all his life long, ached for acceptance in a culture which pronounced straight hair and white skin the only acceptable beauty.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has described the population of people from French colonies in Africa who live in Paris, noting the difficulties they face, some of which correspond to the oppression of black Americans. However, in this paragraph he proposes that there is also an important distinction between the experiences of Africans and African Americans. Although colonialism is violent and brutal, it does not rob native peoples of their inheritance and identity in the same way that the transatlantic slave trade did to African Americans. Furthermore, black Americans are now effectively stuck in a country that does not accept them, without having a viable connection to the places from which their ancestors originated.

It may seem as if Baldwin is taking a strangely competitive attitude to the respective traumas of Africans and African Americans. However, a more generous reading would suggest that Baldwin is simply trying to clarify the differences that undeniably exist between black people across the world, and to explain why there can be difficulties in black Americans connecting with black people from colonized countries.

Equal in Paris Quotes

No people come into possession of a culture without having paid a heavy price for it.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has explained that he arrived in Paris with only $40 to his name and no knowledge of French language or culture; instead, he had only the vague impression that French people were "an ancient, intelligent, and cultured race." In this short quotation, he retrospectively remarks that the French paid "a heavy price" for these positive cultural attributes. Although in the present it can seem as if France's greatness arose of its own accord, in reality the wealth, power, and cultural vibrancy of France is the result of the brutality of colonialism.

This point puts a new spin on the theme of inheritance. While it may seem like white French people's inheritance of French culture is a neutral, innocent fact, in reality this inheritance is tainted by the suffering and death of colonized peoples, which was executed purely for the benefit of the French.

Stranger in the Village Quotes

❝ Joyce is right about history being a nightmare––but it may be the nightmare from which no one can awaken. People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166-167

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has described the time he spent staying in a Swiss village which he was the first black person ever to visit. He recalls bristling at the sound of the village children shouting "*Neger!*" as he walked past. Even though he knows that they are not using this epithet in the same way that American children would, he still feels deeply wounded by it. In this passage, he elaborates on the writer James Joyce's idea of history being a nightmare. Baldwin's use of "history" here corresponds to his earlier discussions of inheritance. Nobody can avoid inheriting history, and this inheritance will always be a part of people, shaping who they are, how they behave, and how they understand the world.

Due to the legacy of brutality that has shaped much of world history, as well as the reality of stagnation where there should be progress, this inheritance can often feel like a nightmare. However, if it truly is a nightmare "from which no one can awaken," perhaps it is time to acknowledge the importance of history in a different way. Is there a way that people can approach history that does not leave them feeling horrified and trapped, but rather accepting of reality and hopeful about the future?

❝ There is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites. The white man takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned; whereas I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even, in a sense, created me, people who have cost me more in anguish and rage than they will ever know, who yet do not even know of my existence. The astonishment with which I might have greeted them, should they have stumbled into my African village a few hundred years ago, might have rejoiced their hearts. But the astonishment with which they greet me today can only poison mine.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has described the village's practice of "buying" indigenous Africans in order to convert them to Christianity. This leads him to think about what it must have been like for the first white men to arrive in villages and Africa, and how this contrasts to his experience as the first black man in the Swiss village. He notes that there is a fundamental difference between the two situations due to the way in which he, as an African-American person, has inevitably been shaped by European culture. Although he might be a stranger to the Swiss villagers, they cannot be a stranger to him. This reality is painful; colonialism and slavery have not only created a fundamental inequality between white people and black people, but also an inevitable lack of reciprocity. Whereas black Americans (and colonized Africans) have intimate knowledge of white people and European culture, the reverse is certainly not the case.

Note that Baldwin's argument in this paragraph explains why it is nonsensical to discuss "reverse racism" or claim false equivalence between black people and white people. The historical reality of colonialism has left black people and white people not only in different positions, but with different relationships to one another. For this reason, Baldwin cannot enter the village with the mindset of a

curious explorer; instead, his appearance as a "stranger" is inevitably traumatic and painful.

There is a great deal of will power involved in the white man's naïveté. Most people are not naturally reflective any more than they are naturally malicious, and the white man prefers to keep the black man at a certain human remove because it is easier for him thus to preserve his simplicity and avoid being called to account for crimes committed by his forefathers, or his neighbors.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has been discussing the non-reciprocal relationship between black people and white people; while African Americans are inevitably connected to white people and European culture, white people insist on keeping black people at a distance. In this passage, he argues that white people's ignorance and disconnection from black people is no coincidence, but rather a forced relation that white people conspire to maintain in order to avoid dealing with the racist crimes of both the past and present. This argument is central to Baldwin's understanding of the tie between intimacy and hatred, as well as the different ways in which black people and white people deal with inheritance. While African Americans are denied access to their own inheritance, white people embrace some aspects of their heritage while assuming an artificial naïveté or ignorance about the violent aspects of white/European culture.

At the root of the American Negro problem is the necessity of the American white man to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself. And the history of this problem can be reduced to the means used by Americans––lynch law and law, segregation and legal acceptance, terrorization and concession––either to come to terms with this necessity, or to find a way around it, or (most usually) to find a way of doing both these things at once. The resulting spectacle, at once foolish and dreadful, led someone to make the quite accurate observation that "the Negro in America is a form of insanity which overtakes white men."

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has argued that, contrary to popular belief, American ideals did not originate in the United States but were transplanted from Europe; the most important of these ideals is white supremacy. In this passage, Baldwin challenges the assumption that racist oppression is purely motivated by hatred or disdain for black people. Rather, he argues that oppressive acts from segregation to lynching are, in fact, the white man's attempt to live "with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself." Once again, Baldwin emphasizes the way in which African Americans are a part of white people's identity, psyche, and soul. White people may try to separate themselves from black people, but the reality is that the two groups are deeply implicated in one another.

Baldwin has described the harmful psychic impact of racism on black people at length, but here he suggests that black people create a kind of insanity in white people. This is not the fault of black people themselves, but rather it is due to white people's false ideas and fears about black people, as well as their inability to confront history and the reality of their racist crimes.

The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin has argued that American society is only beginning to come to terms with the extent of its denial, delusion, and dishonesty about black people and racial difference in general. However, it is already clear that white people who wish to stick to the old racial order and maintain a false naïveté about race are doomed to fail. In this passage, he

sets out the central point of his argument in "Stranger in the Village." White people may hold a desire to return to a state of "innocence" in which black people do not exist (or at least do not exist to them), but this is simply not possible.

This point ties together many of Baldwin's previous arguments, including the idea that black and white people's identities are inherently bound up in each other, and history must be confronted in order for there to be a viable, progressive future. It also draws on his argument that the intimacy between white and black Americans can create feelings of hatred and alienation, but that these feelings are ultimately not sustainable and will lead to self-destruction unless white people begin to treat black people as equal and valued human beings.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE TO THE 1984 EDITION

When Baldwin's friend told him to write *Notes of a Native Son*, he objected that he was "too young to publish my memoirs." Baldwin had returned to the United States from **Paris** in 1954, for reasons that remain unclear to him. He recalls that 1954-55 was overall a great year; he lived at a writers' colony, watched his friend Marlon Brando win an Oscar, and had his play put on at Howard University, where it was popular despite objections from the faculty and negative reviews in the press. Baldwin also fell in love, although he adds that he didn't have any money. He finished the short novel *Giovanni's Room*, and agreed to publish *Notes of a Native Son* even though he did not consider himself an essayist. At the same time Baldwin felt that he wanted to discover himself through the project and to access his "inheritance" and his "birthright."

In the opening to the preface, Baldwin addresses different ideas about time, age, and maturity. He initially rejects the idea of publishing "Notes of a Native Son" because he thinks he is too young to publish his memoirs, yet he doesn't elaborate on what he means by this. Is the problem that he hasn't had sufficient life experience to write about, or that not enough time has passed to achieve a retrospective outlook on his existing experiences? At the same time, Baldwin also suggests that writing memoir is a way of accessing his "birthright," which by its definition is something he should not have to wait until old age to receive.

Baldwin reflects on the nature of inheritance and the way in which people are and are not the product of their circumstances. He describes his wish to reclaim the inheritance that he has been denied. Unfortunately, not much has changed since Baldwin wrote the book. White people live in fear of black people and treat them as superfluous and unwanted members of society. Baldwin thinks back to the African chiefs who sold people to slave traders, noting that there is no way they could have known that slavery would last forever, or "at least *a thousand years*." Meanwhile, in the United States, movies like *Gone With the Wind* create a false image "of the happy darky," which many Americans believe is accurate. Baldwin notes that, for the most part, the only evidence of white supremacy has come through the testimony of black people, and that in the contemporary world white people "have the choice of becoming human or irrelevant."

One of the characteristics of Baldwin's writing style is the way in which he moves quickly between different thoughts and references. For example, in this passage he jumps from discussions of inheritance and social determinism to the stagnation of racial justice to African slave traders to "Gone with the Wind." While these examples may seem distinct from one another, they all support Baldwin's point that the past—a person's "inheritance"—is something inescapable. The weight of inheriting centuries of racist violence and oppression can be difficult to comprehend, but that does not mean anyone should turn to comforting and sentimental myths for relief, such as those portrayed in "Gone with the Wind."

Baldwin was 31 when *Notes of a Native Son* was published and is now 60. He considers himself a "survivor" of prejudice and oppression. He recalls being told that "it takes time" for the world to change, but he objects to the logic that black people must patiently wait to be treated as human. Baldwin laments the fact that black Americans cannot trust the words of their "morally bankrupt and desperately dishonest countrymen." He concludes with a quote from Doris Lessing, who argues that the white oppression of black people is one of the worst crimes of all of humanity, yet it is just one component of the overall block that prevents people from identifying with all living creatures.

The end of the preface is simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic. It is clear that, at the age of 31, Baldwin hoped and expected there would be a larger degree of progress by the time he reached 60 than has actually been the case. At the same time, Baldwin remains steadfast in his determination that the world will change and he characterizes this change as inevitable. His impatience in refusing to concede that "it takes time" is itself a kind of optimism pushing against widespread cynical "realism."

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Baldwin was born in Harlem and spent much of his youth looking after his many younger siblings. He was a keen reader and read every book he could find except the Bible, because that was the one he was told to read. At 12, he wrote a story that was accepted for publication in a **church** newspaper, but was then censored. He also wrote songs, plays, and poetry. His father disapproved of his writing and wanted him to become a preacher, which he did between the ages of 14 and 17, before leaving home. Baldwin wrote two books in his early 20s for which he received fellowships, but which were deemed "unsalable." At 24, he moved to France and finished the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Baldwin was born into difficult circumstances, yet was sustained during these years by his love of literature and single-minded determination to become a writer. Despite his precocious early success, it seems that the world was not ready to accept his work, as evidenced by the censorship of his story in the church newspaper and his first two books being called "unsalable." This can be blamed on the climate of delusion and dishonesty that Baldwin denounces throughout the book.

Baldwin reflects on the aspects of his upbringing that helped and hindered his development as a writer. He suggests that the King James Bible, the "store-front **church**," black American speech, and Dickens all influenced his current writing style. However, the single biggest influence on him was the fact that he was born black. He points out that much has been written about "the Negro problem," but that almost none of this writing is very good, in part because both black and white Americans are reluctant to examine the past. Baldwin himself reached a turning point when he acknowledged the fact that he was a "bastard of the West," and that European history and culture were not really his inheritance. At the same time, he also realized that he would have to "appropriate" white heritage in order to form a sense of heritage of his own, because he also had no personal connection to Africa. He felt a crushing sense of self-destructiveness and a hatred and fear of the world.

This is one of the most important passages in the book. It explains Baldwin's sense of his own identity and heritage and it establishes the foundation of his exploration of African American life. Baldwin's realization that white European culture and history do not "belong" to him highlights the particular alienation that black Americans experience, being surrounded by culture that do not pertain to them. At the same time, this observation also calls into question the way we think about heritage and identity. Is it really the case that white Americans have a connection to Bach or Rembrandt just because of their ancestry and the color of their skin?

People inevitably write from their own experiences, and Baldwin feels that writing about blackness was "the gate I had to unlock" before approaching other subjects. He argues that everyone in America is affected by "the Negro problem," regardless of their race. He praises Ralph Ellison for being the first writer he has encountered that represented the black experience in all its "ambiguity and irony." Baldwin says he enjoys making experimental films with his 16mm camera, eating and drinking, discussion, and laughing. He is not a fan of the bohemian lifestyle, which he finds too hedonistic, and he resents people who either like or dislike him on account of his race. Baldwin loves America and thus he is highly critical of it. He strives for skepticism, nuance, and honesty, and places the greatest value on getting his work done.

At the time Baldwin is writing, many people assume that "the Negro problem" is something that affects black Americans alone and, therefore, that only black people should have to address it. In this passage, Baldwin corrects this delusion by pointing out that, as much as being black is a definitive part of his identity, it is also an accidental attribute that does not determine who he is as a person or disconnect him from people of other races. Black people must be treated as equal human beings before any real understanding or progress on racial injustice can take place.

EVERYBODY'S PROTEST NOVEL

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the white master St. Clare tells his cousin, Miss Ophelia, that black people have been put in the service of white people in this world, and that this injustice may perhaps be corrected in the afterlife. Miss Ophelia, presumably voicing the opinion of the author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, is horrified. Baldwin argues that the characters in the novel never question the simplistic terms within which they frame morality. This corresponds to contemporary morals about racial oppression, which rarely go beyond shallow, righteous indignation. Baldwin concludes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is "a very bad novel" because of its "virtuous sentimentality." Sentimentality is dishonest and cowardly, and thus slyly cruel. Stowe fails to interrogate peoples' reasons for acting the way they do, and for this reason *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is more of a "pamphlet" than a novel.

In order to understand Baldwin's critique of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," it is important to bear in mind that the novel is widely celebrated as a landmark in the history of racial equality and a symbol of progress. In this essay, Baldwin suggests that such praise is unwarranted for a number of reasons, the first of which is that "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is not a very good novel. Novels should present us with a complex and honest view of reality that enriches our understanding of the human condition. Instead, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" just rehashes simplistic moral positions.

Baldwin argues that in order for the novel to be more truthful, Stowe would have had to be committed to representing humanity, rather than a "Cause." He claims that oversimplifying people's complexity and ambiguity diminishes humanity. Baldwin points out that there are actually fairly few black characters in the book, and that they are either rendered in a stereotypical fashion or are given attributes of whiteness. The controversial character of Uncle Tom, meanwhile, is only redeemed from his blackness through his total humility. Ultimately, Stowe maintains the association of blackness with evil and whiteness with purity. The novel is written out of a fear of damnation and gives the reader a false sense of assurance that they are virtuous simply for reading it. In reality, protest novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are nothing more than sentimental fantasies that reflect fear, confusion, and denial of truth.

In this passage, Baldwin argues against the assumption that, because "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is an anti-slavery novel, it is automatically racially progressive. While Stowe's intention may have been to portray black characters in a positive light, she ultimately undermines this goal by preserving the racist principle that virtue is linked to whiteness. Defenders of Stowe might suggest that it would have been difficult to overcome such a mindset as a white woman living in 19th-century America. While this is arguably true, Baldwin's point that the novel should not be read as a symbol of racial progress still stands.

Baldwin compares the goal of the protest novel to that of white missionaries in Africa. He laments the fact that society is able to convince oppressed people that they are inferior to their oppressors. People often forget that both the oppressed and the oppressor are "bound together" by the same beliefs. This is why many black people themselves continue to associate whiteness with virtue. Baldwin discusses Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, and argues that its central character, Bigger Thomas, is in fact a "descendant" of Stowe's Uncle Tom. The tragedy of Bigger's life is that he has accepted the terms of America's racist ideology, and thus must "battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria." Protest novels fail because they do not engage the full reality of human existence, instead reducing people to simplistic categories.

Baldwin's argument that both oppressed and oppressor share the same beliefs is provocative. Many would counter that black people have a totally different perspective on the world than white people, and thus it doesn't make sense to say both groups hold the same ideas. However, while people of different races do certainly have different perspectives, they nonetheless share the same world—a world saturated with racist ideology. As Baldwin suggests through his discussion of "Native Son," many black people come to unconsciously believe and replicate racist ideology.

MANY THOUSANDS GONE

Baldwin argues that black people have been unable to tell their story to "the white majority," who have been unwilling and unable to listen. Yet in reality, the story of African Americans is the story of America itself. White people have developed particular ways of thinking about black people, through statistics, categories, and simplistic moral positions such as righteousness or outrage. These ways of thinking have very little to do with the reality of black life, yet when black people contradict white peoples' ideas they risk "immediate retaliation." Prevailing ideas about black people have changed over time, but these ideas have always been a product of guilt rather than a reflection of reality. Today, false science and negative stereotypes about black people have been disproven, yet society is still strictly segregated along racial lines.

In this passage Baldwin argues that it is not only hateful and hostile thinking that inhibits racial progress; it is also seemingly neutral or positive ways of thinking, such as scientific analysis or indignation at racial inequality. The problem with these forms of thought is not that they intend to oppress black people, but that they are dishonest. Baldwin argues that every false idea about black people is harmful, and that almost all ideas about black people circulated within white society are false.

The racist stereotypes of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom may have disappeared, yet we must understand them in order to understand what it means to be black in America. While both are theoretically positive figures beloved by white people, negative ideas about black people are in fact threaded into their supposedly positive attributes. Moreover, the intimacy of the master-slave (or master-servant) relationship creates a well-founded suspicion that black people understand white people better than white people understand themselves. This causes tension between the races that persists in the present. Baldwin concludes that "it is a sentimental error… to believe that the past is dead."

The end of this passage contains a subtle but crucially important point. Baldwin suggests that white people hate and fear black people precisely because of the intimacy between them. The two races have coexisted in America for centuries, and the social structure of servitude has meant that black people have developed an extensive knowledge of whites. This puts the races on an uneven playing field, as white people do not understand black people to nearly the same extent.

Baldwin argues that people become American when they cut off ties to other cultures, histories, and identities, and that this happened to African Americans by force. Black people were given no choice but to accept the image of themselves invented by white society. Richard Wright's *Native Son* is "the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America," and people tend to believe that its publication alone is proof of racial progress. The novel falls into an American tradition of depicting a young person struggling against his circumstances. While it may at first seem surprising that the novel was so popular and successful, in fact it is not surprising at all. The book is a product of the 1930s, a time of righteous anger at social inequality and injustice. Wright became the "spokesman" of "the New Negro" and was doomed by this task, as it is not possible for one person to represent 13 million others. This burden prevented Wright from accurately depicting his own experience. Instead, he replicated the false vision of black people held by most Americans.

At first glance, Baldwin's critique of "Native Son" closely resembles his critique of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." However, there is a crucial difference between the two novels; whereas "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was published in 1852 and was written by a white woman, "Native Son" was published in 1940 and was written by a black man. We might therefore expect there to be a vast difference between the two authors' approach to racial equality. However, Baldwin contends that this is not in fact the case. Although Wright is black, he has internalized the same racist ideology that prevents "Uncle Tom's Cabin" from being a truly progressive novel. Wright's experience as a black man, while significant, does not overcome the prevailing power of racist ideas.

Baldwin feels that Wright's aim was to depict a "monster" created by America, and that this would have been an interesting goal if Wright had not attempted to redeem this monster "in social terms." The reader learns very little about Bigger over the course of the novel; although the other black characters are more three-dimensional, Wright gives no sense of Bigger's relationship to them. This creates the impression that black people are isolated from one another and that they have no traditions, customs, or social intercourse of their own. Within the American psyche, the reality of black life is obscured and incomprehensible. When white people interact with the polite and good-natured black people around them, they are haunted by the figure of the "nigger," who represents all the negativity associated with blackness. Baldwin proposes that every black person has, at some point or other, felt a desire to seek violent vengeance against whites and in doing so live up to the image of the "nigger," which they have been taught to believe represents themselves.

As Baldwin explains, racist oppression creates "monstrosity" in two ways. The first of these is material; due to centuries of impoverishment, injustice, and persecution, black people at times find themselves in desperate situations that can lead them to acts of violence. The other form of oppression that leads to monstrosity is psychological. Black people are bombarded with negative stereotypes about their race, symbolized by the figure of the "nigger." Baldwin argues that black people internalize this figure and measure their actions against it, even sometimes wishing to succumb to it as if it were true. Of course, in reality this figure is nothing more than a racist myth; yet when given enough power, myths can have a strong impact on reality.

In killing the white character Mary, Bigger "force[s] his oppressors to see the fruit of that oppression." Yet Wright does not explore Bigger's subjectivity to a sufficient degree, and when Bigger dies he is not shown to be a martyr-like symbol for his community, but rather as an isolated individual who acted out of "his hatred and his self-hatred." Baldwin argues that *Native Son* is doomed by its replication of the (false) American understanding of black life. In the end, Bigger is redeemed by progressive white people, who end up confirming that black life is just as "debased and impoverished" as racist ideology teaches people to believe. White readers are easily convinced that such conditions could produce the "monstrosity" of Bigger's life. Furthermore, Bigger becomes a warning sign of the possibility of black people seeking vengeance for the injustices they have suffered. Baldwin argues that such a warning misses the point that such vengeance is unlikely, in part because white and black Americans exist in a "blood relation."

Baldwin does not condemn Wright for making Bigger a "monstrous" figure, but rather for making him a monstrous figure who was then redeemed. This distinction is important because if Bigger was allowed to exist as an unredeemed "monster," the blame for his act of murder would have to be placed on white society for creating conditions that drove him to do it. Instead, Bigger's act becomes about Bigger himself—an individual misdeed rather than a symptom of societal injustice. White readers of the book may feel comfortably distanced from Bigger, and yet—as the end of this passage indicates—they are in fact far more deeply implicated in Bigger's wrongdoing than they would like to believe.

Baldwin states that "Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny." He argues that every black person has his own version of Bigger Thomas living inside his mind, and that black people will only be set free by acknowledging that "this dark and dangerous and unloved stranger" is an inevitable part of them. As a symbol of warning, Bigger does nothing more than reflect the fear and guilt white Americans feel about black people and confirm the association between blackness and evil. Because of this, Bigger can only be redeemed through death. *Native Son* ultimately confirms the liberal "dream" of a future in which race no longer exists. While this dream may not be problematic on its surface, it secretly requires that black people assimilate into whiteness into order to become "truly human and acceptable."

In this passage, Baldwin critiques another progressive myth: the idea that it is both possible and desirable for society to move forward into a state in which race no longer exists. Hypothetically, such a society may be a good place; in reality, however, the dream of a race-less world often equates to a world in which blackness has been eradicated and only whiteness is left. Ironically, this is the exact same dream harbored by white nationalists and other racist extremists. Baldwin thus suggests that liberals and racists might have more in common than is often presumed.

CARMEN JONES: THE DARK IS LIGHT ENOUGH

Baldwin argues that the film *Carmen Jones* revolves around a parallel between "an amoral gypsy and an amoral Negro woman"; at the same time, it denies the charge that black people are amoral by making the black characters in the film seem white. The film is an adaptation of the 19th-century French opera *Carmen* with an all-black cast. Baldwin denounces the music in the film as "bald" and "badly sung," and argues that the lyrics are crude and vulgar in a way that is not characteristic of black people. He praises the performance of Pearl Bailey, who seems to convey a sense of disdain at the film itself. He argues that Dorothy Dandridge, who plays Carmen, looks silly next to the far more genuine Bailey. Baldwin also criticizes the speech in the film, which has been drained of the charm and authenticity of real black American speech. The characters themselves seem whitewashed to appear "clean" and "modern."

Like the two novels Baldwin has critiqued thus far, "Carmen Jones" purports to be racially progressive—it features an all-black cast and ostensibly denies the association of black people with immorality. However, as with the novels, this appearance is deceptive. In this passage, Baldwin makes clear that his ethical objection to the film is inextricable from his aesthetic critique. The film's look and sound are offensive not only on an aesthetic level, but also because of how they misrepresent black people. Baldwin emphasizes that the film is at fault for obscuring the beauty of blackness.

Baldwin contends that the film's flaws are the product of Hollywood's condescending attitude toward black people. The film does not represent the reality of black life, and it subtly exhibits disdain for lower-class black people, revealed in the reluctance with which the actors pronounce "the" as "de." Baldwin notes the fact that most of the actors are light-skinned, with the exception of Bailey (who plays a "floozie") and a few other actors who play immoral characters. The movie rids itself of all signs of "excitement and violence," as well as sexuality. Moments that are supposed to be erotic are instead "infantile," "sterile," and "distressing." Baldwin points out that while Dandridge is dressed in revealing outfits, the male lead, Harry Belafonte, is notably desexualized, suggesting that black male sexuality is still considered too threatening to be represented. *Carmen Jones* remains important not because of what it conveys about black people, but rather what it conveys about white Americans. "Ciphers" like the characters in the film do not exist in real life. The reality that the film *does* represent is the "empty" and "disturbed" nature of the white psyche.

Here Baldwin shows that having a black cast alone is not an inoculation against racism. He outlines several dynamics at play in the film that speak to the complexity and difficulty of African-American experience. For example, the fact that most actors are light-skinned (and that the few darker-skinned actors play immoral characters) is an example of colorism, meaning the privileging of light skin and the prejudice against dark skin. Colorism is created by (and closely related to) racism, but is nonetheless a distinct phenomenon. Meanwhile, the palpable resistance to representing Harry Belafonte's sexuality is indicative of white people's sexual anxieties (and fantasies) about black men. Once again, these anxieties provide far more information about white people themselves than they do about black people.

THE HARLEM GHETTO

Harlem has not changed much since Baldwin's parents were young; it remains characterized by injustice, poverty, and overcrowding. There have been some efforts to improve the neighborhood by adding facilities such as a Boys' Club and playground. These projects receive the support of black leaders and the black press, who also encourage the construction of more schools, although Baldwin is dubious about the effectiveness of such efforts. Baldwin bemoans the plight of black leaders, who exist within a political system that thwarts them at every turn. At the same time, he notes that many leaders are self-serving.

The lack of progress that Baldwin has previously described in the context of white people's attitude toward race is also an issue when it comes to the material conditions of black people in Harlem. Although Baldwin does not say so explicitly, the efforts to improve the ghetto through new facilities seem to be fundamentally undermined by a lack of major economic redistribution. In other words, no matter how many playgrounds or schools get built, people in Harlem remain disproportionately poor.

Baldwin is similarly critical of the black press, pointing out its sensational elements (although arguing that this is hardly unique within the American media landscape) and criticizing the columnist Paul Robeson for buying into anti-communist fervor. He praises the "high-class" Pittsburgh *Courier*, known as the best African-American newspaper, and disparages the magazines *Ebony* and *Our World*, which claim to represent "the better class of Negro." Baldwin laments the fact that the black press models itself on white publications, meaning that the hollowness and "decay" plaguing white society can also be found reflected in black media. He argues that the black press is unfairly used as a "scapegoat" and that people make unrealistic demands of it.

It can at times seem like Baldwin takes an overly harsh attitude toward black-produced culture, media, and politics, and that his critiques may in fact inhibit progress rather than enabling it. However, it is important to recall the statement he makes earlier in the novel: "I love America more than any country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." For Baldwin, criticism is constructive and originates from a place of love, not bitterness.

Baldwin notes that African-Americans are generally very religious; there are likely more **churches** in Harlem than in any other ghetto in the country, and these churches vary enormously in size and style. He claims that some misunderstand black people's religiosity as childlike, when it is in fact driven by the far more "sinister" desire for vengeance on white people and other wrongdoers. Black Americans have an "ambivalent" relationship to Jews. On one hand, they identify with the Jewish experience of slavery, persecution, exile, and homelessness; yet on the other, they resent Jewish landlords and businessmen for their role in the American capitalist tradition of exploiting black people. Few African Americans trust Jews, even while most would probably prefer to work for a Jew than for a white gentile. Some claim that Jews should have learned to treat black people better due to their own experience of persecution; in reality, however, the oppression of Jewish Americans tends to further alienate them from black people, a division which ultimately serves white gentiles most of all.

The relationship between black and Jewish Americans is one of the most important examples of the coexistence of intimacy and hatred in the book. Baldwin argues that black people resent Jews for many of the exact same reasons *that they identify with them. Both groups carry with them a similar history of persecution and both suffer from a sense of homelessness created through diasporic existence. While on one level this unites Jews and African Americans, on another it drives them further apart. Note that Baldwin places a special emphasis on capitalism as a reason for the division between different oppressed groups. When people exist in a state of competition with one another, it becomes much harder to form alliances of trust and solidarity.*

Baldwin recalls times when he has tried in vain to convince black acquaintances that anti-Semitism functions according to the same harmful logic as anti-black racism. He argues that it is hard to overcome the bitterness instilled in black people by centuries of torment and injustice. He disagrees with the idea that the experience of oppression creates wisdom or gentleness in the oppressed. Prolonged injustice, the stagnation of progress, and the continued assertion of inferiority instead create feelings of frustration, madness, and rage. All over the United States, black people are traumatized by the conditions of their lives; Baldwin argues that "the wonder is not that so many are ruined but that so many survive." Jewish people often become the scapegoat at which black Americans misdirect their anger.

This passage is important, because it contains another major point of disagreement between Baldwin and other prominent public intellectuals (of all races). It is common to argue that the experience of oppression, even if lamentable in itself, has a "silver lining" of making oppressed people wiser and kinder than they might otherwise be. However, Baldwin rejects this line of thinking and is keen to highlight the bitterness and fury black people feel over the centuries of injustice they have been forced to endure.

JOURNEY TO ATLANTA

People often say that all Americans distrust politicians, and Baldwin suggests that African Americans distrust them the most. Although black people may feel excited over the possibility of change, they are also accustomed to expect that nothing will come of a politician's promises. Black liberals tend to argue that the black community's cynicism and apathy about electoral politics will fade with increased education, but Baldwin contends that education will do nothing to change what black people have learned from experience: that "our people never get anywhere." Black people also tend to care little for black politicians, who simply by virtue of being politicians are distanced from the reality of most black people's lives. Both the Progressive Party and the Communist Party have failed to live up to the promises they made to black communities.

Baldwin indicates that white people tend to blame black people themselves for their lack of engagement with politics, suggesting that black people's political "apathy" is their own fault. Even black liberals hold this view, blaming a lack of education for the dearth of enthusiasm for party politics among African Americans. However, Baldwin points out that it is misguided (and deeply unfair) to place blame on black people. The fault surely lies with the individual politicians, parties, and entire political system in the United States, which was not built to accommodate black interests or respond to their needs.

Baldwin notes that recently two of his brothers traveled to Atlanta with their vocal quartet as musical support for the Progressive Party's tour, and that the younger of the brothers, David, kept a detailed account of the trip, which had been arranged by a black merchant seaman called Mr. Warde. The quartet was to sing at **churches** throughout the south, after which party representatives would make speeches and hand out literature. However, when they arrived in Atlanta, a white party member named Mrs. Price told the quartet that they would be canvassing, despite the fact that none of them knew or cared about the Progressive Party or were even old enough to vote. Yet they were sent out to canvass anyway, each of the black quartet singers paired with a white person to symbolize "brotherhood." During the three days of canvassing, their expenses were paid but they earned no money. The quartet eventually began to make their own singing engagements.

The story of the quartet's trip to Atlanta highlights the way in which black people are used and exploited by politicians in order to earn votes. As a white member of the Progressive Party who commandeers the quartet's time in the south, Mrs. Price symbolizes the seemingly well-intentioned white political class who manipulates and mistreats black people for their own gain. Mrs. Price clearly has little respect for the quartet, changing their duties at will and refusing to let them earn money by singing as they were promised. At the same time, she uses them to make it appear as if the Progressive Party respects black people.

Eventually the quartet was asked to sing at an event hosted by the Party, but after too much time singing in the open air they were hoarse. They refused to sing, which infuriated Mrs. Price, who sent a group of black policemen to prevent the quartet from singing at their own events. Although the quartet was terrified, David also found it amusing that the Progressive Party should send black policemen after them, as this seemed to be in keeping with the party's promise of racial equality. They didn't see Mrs. Price again, and after buying them some food and bus tickets home, Mr. Warde left them to visit his family. The quartet had only made $6, not even enough to feed themselves on the journey home. Baldwin notes that they laugh about it now, and that the four men surprisingly feel no resentment toward the Progressive Party. He concludes with a quote from David, who says that all political parties are the same, adding: "Ain't none of 'em gonna do a thing for *me*."

David's amusement at his encounter with the black policemen highlights the farcical aspect of political parties' claims to represent the interests of black people. His casual reaction to the quartet's mistreatment at the hands of the Progressive Party may seem like an indication that the entire series of events was not such a big deal. However, Baldwin emphasizes that David in fact reacted this way simply because he is so accustomed to being lied to, disrespected, and exploited by politicians (and white people more generally). This has led David—and many black people like him—to develop an overarching cynicism about politics.

NOTES OF A NATIVE SON

Baldwin's father died in 1943, a few hours before his last child was born. After his father's funeral, which took place on Baldwin's birthday, a race riot broke out in Harlem. This series of events seemed to have been designed to mock Baldwin's lack of belief in the apocalypse, a distinct contrast to the beliefs of his father. Baldwin and his father had a difficult relationship. His father did not know exactly when he was born, but he knew that his mother was alive during slavery. He was born in New Orleans—which Baldwin thinks of as "one of the most wicked of cities"—and moved North after 1919. Baldwin's father was handsome and proud. He was severely cruel and bitter, yet also charming. When he attempted to show his children affection, the children would inevitably freeze up in fright, only to be furiously punished. Baldwin's father found it difficult to connect with people, and although he wanted to impress others, he was never successful.

Baldwin's assessment of his father is unflinchingly honest, thereby conveying both the hatred and love he feels for him. While Baldwin's view of his father's personality may seem unkind, it also demonstrates the extent to which he knew and understood his father. Although Baldwin does not explicitly relate his father's behavior back to his experience of racial oppression, there is a clear connection between Baldwin's exploration of the inner turmoil and bitterness that afflicts all black Americans and his father's anger, cruelty, and alienation from those around him.

Baldwin was frightened by his father's bitterness and frightened of inheriting it. When his father died, Baldwin had newly discovered the full weight of the burden of white people, and he became convinced that "the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me." It wasn't until Baldwin's father became fatally ill that his family realized that he suffered from mental health problems, which caused him to experience paranoia and behave cruelly to the children. Baldwin's father eventually came to believe that his family was poisoning him and refused to eat. He was committed to a mental hospital, where it was discovered that he had tuberculosis.

Baldwin's father's mental health problems cast a shadow over Baldwin's life, as Baldwin lives with the awareness that he may inherit them. Just as Baldwin's father himself suffered from paranoid delusions, Baldwin becomes paranoid about inheriting this paranoia. Baldwin thus conveys the way in which trauma is passed through generations, even between people who—like Baldwin and his father—have very different experiences and dispositions.

Baldwin's father had nine children, and the family lived in terrible poverty. When white welfare workers and bill collectors would come to the house, Baldwin's mother would speak to them, as Baldwin's father's temper was too unpredictable. When Baldwin was 9 or 10, a young white teacher "took an interest" in him and offered to bring him to the theatre to see plays. Baldwin's father was highly suspicious of the arrangement and only agreed with great reluctance. Although the teacher continued to support Baldwin and the family, Baldwin's father never trusted her, and he later advised his son to stay away from white people as much as possible.

This passage contains a perfect example of the way in which racism can cause people to develop a self-destructive relationship to the world. The special attention of the white teacher is a positive opportunity for the young Baldwin to get ahead—yet his father is so distrustful of white people that he cannot imagine the situation as anything other than a threat. Given the scale and intensity of racist oppression, it's difficult to blame him for this paranoia.

The year before his father's death, Baldwin had been living in New Jersey, where he had been living among both black and white people. He acted, as he always did, in a confident and self-assured manner, which caused his coworkers to treat him with intense hostility. Baldwin went to a self-service restaurant four times before being informed that black people were not served there, and that the wait staff had been waiting for him to realize this. The same thing happened to him at establishments all over the state, and he began to fear going outside. He also began to be overcome with a "blind fever," an overwhelming rage he believes all black people at times feel toward white society.

Here Baldwin describes two parallel examples of the way in which racist societies force people to suppress their emotions. At the diner, the white wait staff are not forthcoming about the fact that they do not serve black people, suggesting that they are embarrassed and perhaps even sympathetic to Baldwin, but do not feel able to express this. Meanwhile, Baldwin and other black people harbor a destructive rage that they must suppress in order to function and survive.

On his last night in New Jersey, Baldwin's white friend took him to Trenton to see a movie. After, they went to a diner called "American Diner," where a waitress told them they didn't serve black people. Baldwin left and suddenly felt compelled to "do something to crush these white faces." He walked into a large, glamorous restaurant and waited a long time before the frightened-looking white waitress approached him. Apologetically, she told him that they didn't serve black people, and when Baldwin did nothing, repeated her statement. Baldwin grabbed a nearby water mug and threw it in her face, before immediately running out of the restaurant. His friend lingered outside the restaurant to send the police in the wrong direction. Afterward, Baldwin felt a sense of guilt toward his friend, as well as a shock at the realization that he could have been murdered and that he was prepared to murder someone himself.

Baldwin's conflicting emotions in this scene highlight the extent of the emotional turmoil caused by living as a black person in a racist society. He experiences a sense of fury so powerful that it overwhelms practical considerations of his own safety—yet at the same time, he feels guilt toward his white friend and fear at the murderous rage living inside his own heart. These conflicts of emotion illustrate the extent to which racism alienates Baldwin from himself and causes him to lose control of his actions.

Baldwin rushed home, not wanting to miss the birth of his sibling or his father's death. He felt that all of Harlem was "infected by waiting." During this time, the country was plagued by racial tensions, and Baldwin was acutely aware of the presence of police everywhere he went. He also noticed unusual combinations of people grouped together on stoops who seemed to share a "common vision" and who were each living under the same "bitter shadow." Meanwhile, the war was creating a widespread feeling of powerlessness and unhappiness.

Baldwin's statement that Harlem is "infected by waiting" carries multiple meanings. As racial tensions rise, the residents of Harlem wait for a climactic event to take place; at the same time they are also waiting for the end of the war, and—in a broader sense—the progress toward racial equality for which black people have been waiting since their abduction to the United States.

Baldwin visited his father only once during his illness. He had avoided seeing his father because he wanted to cling to the hatred he felt for him during his life. Baldwin observes: "One of the reasons people cling to hate so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain." Baldwin traveled to see his father with his aunt, who criticized Baldwin in order to distract herself from the reality that her younger brother was dying. When they arrived at the hospital, Baldwin's aunt cried at the sight of her brother looking so weak and small. There was a whistling sound coming from Baldwin's father's throat. The next morning, he was pronounced dead, and his baby was born shortly after.

Baldwin's honest articulation of the reason he avoided seeing his father is an example of one of the major themes of the book—the way in which people avoid the truth in favor of a harmful delusion that they believe is preferable. Clinging to his hatred of his father helps Baldwin avoid the pain of losing him, yet it prevents him from establishing a meaningful relationship with his father. Furthermore, Baldwin emphasizes that hatred is always self-destructive for the person who hates.

The funeral was held on Baldwin's birthday, and he spent the day drinking whisky with a female friend and wondering what to wear because he did not own any black clothes. His friend eventually found him a black shirt. At the **church**, Baldwin reflected that his aunt, who fought with his father throughout his life, was one of the only people who had a real connection with him. During the eulogy, Baldwin notes that the preacher was not describing his father as he really was, but rather inviting the congregation to forgive his father, reminding them that they did not know the full truth of what he suffered. Someone began singing one of Baldwin's father's favorite songs, and suddenly Baldwin was transported to a memory of sitting on his father's lap in church. He recalls that his father used to show off Baldwin's singing voice to others when he was young. He remembers their fights, and the only time in which they "had really spoken to each other." Just before Baldwin left home, his father asked him if he'd "rather write than preach," and Baldwin replied, simply, "Yes." Baldwin did not want to see his father's body in the casket, but had no choice but to go and look. Baldwin felt that his father looked like any "old man dead," and notes the strange proximity of the body to his newborn child.

This passage is a cathartic and redemptive moment in an otherwise bleak essay. Baldwin's inability to find suitable clothes, his sense that the preacher is not being honest, and his reluctance to see his father's body all create the impression that he is alienated from his father and from the process of mourning him. However, at the same time he experiences a sudden sense of connection to his father through the experience of hearing the song. This in turn leads him to remember their only moment of true communication. Although it is tragic that this moment was so fleeting, there is also beauty in the fact that Baldwin recalls it at all, alongside other happy memories of his father's life. The presence of his father's youngest child, a newborn baby, creates a sense of hope. Although Baldwin's father is gone, part of him lives on through his children, who may experience some of the joy and freedom that he was denied.

After the funeral, while Baldwin was downtown celebrating his birthday, a black man and a white policeman got into a fight in Harlem. A rumor circulated that the black man was shot in the back while defending the honor of a black woman, although Baldwin is not certain that this is actually what happened. Regardless, this story sparked a riot, and white businesses in Harlem were damaged. Baldwin laments the fact that the riot destroyed much of the little wealth that Harlem had, although he understands why the riot happened: "To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need." If this violence was ever redirected away from the ghetto and aimed at white people, Baldwin has no doubt that the rioters would be massacred instantly. However, it is unlikely that white people would ever be the target, in part because African Americans' relationship to white people is not entirely defined by hatred but rather something far more complex.

Baldwin's description of the riot highlights his sympathy for the rioters while also making clear his belief in the ultimate inefficacy of riots. He frames the riot as an expression of the rage that he describes as living in the hearts of all black people. Simply because this rage exists, it is necessary that it has some kind of outlet. However, the riot is also a perfect example of the way in which rage is generally a self-destructive force, rather than a way of making actual change in the world. The rioters aim their attacks on Harlem businesses because to do otherwise would risk fatal retaliation—however, this means that the only people affected by the riot are black people, rather than white oppressors.

Baldwin's father used to preach: "But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." As the funeral-goers drove to the cemetery, Baldwin wondered what his father meant by this. He had decided that all his father's religious lines were meaningless, yet in this moment he could hear his father claiming that "bitterness was folly," and knew that he was right. Hatred always destroys the person who hates. Baldwin concludes that it is vital to hold two opposing ideas in one's head: acceptance of "life as it is," mixed with fierce opposition to all injustice. As this became clear to him on the day of the funeral, he wished his father was there to help him find answers.

This final passage draws together the ideas about hatred Baldwin conveys in this essay and offers a forward-looking (if not necessarily optimistic) response to the problem of hatred. Overall, Baldwin characterizes hatred as a negative, destructive (and particularly self-destructive) force. However, anger can be useful if it motivates people to oppose injustice.

ENCOUNTER ON THE SEINE: BLACK MEETS BROWN

In the roaring 1920s, it was relatively easy for black people to become successful entertainers in **Paris**—at least in comparison to the time at which Baldwin is writing. He notes that there are a few black performers working today, including Inez Cavanaugh, who runs her own club specializing in "fried chicken and jazz." In order to be successful today, black entertainers must get along well with other African-Americans living in the city, most of whom are studying on the G.I. Bill. However, Baldwin notes that encountering other Americans in Paris is not always a joyous occasion, and is in fact often embarrassing. White and black Americans are conditioned to view each other with distrust, which can create tension even within pleasant and well-intentioned interactions. Meanwhile, interactions with white Europeans leave black Americans with a sense of uncertainty about their own identity.

The relationship between Americans who encounter each other in Paris is another example of the coexistence of intimacy and hatred. Americans in Paris are defined by their identity, which marks them as different from the French majority; at the same time, they experience this differentiation as individuals, and thus do not necessarily feel connected to other Americans they meet. Furthermore, as Baldwin points out, the racial differentiation that exists between Americans does not evaporate among Americans who find themselves in France—in some ways, it actually becomes more pronounced.

This feeling of confusion becomes even more acute when black Americans encounter Africans from the French colonies living in **Paris**. These Africans harbor a similar sense of bitterness to African Americans, but are less likely to direct this bitterness at themselves. They feel a sense of kinship with their fellow "colonials," with whom they live in impoverished conditions—although Baldwin notes that this is simply the normal standard of living for young people in Paris. Baldwin emphasizes the fact that people from colonized countries do not feel the same sense of alienation from themselves as African Americans do. There is a 300 year gulf of guilt that exists between Africans and African Americans, which cannot be breached in "an evening's good-will." African Americans in Paris may realize that their need to work through their relationship to the past may in fact be a quintessential sign of their own Americanness. They know they will have to return to the United States one day, and that the country will likely not have changed greatly in the time that they have been gone. Baldwin hopes that time will allow black Americans to make peace with themselves and the weight of their history.

In this passage, Baldwin emphasizes that feelings of fear, distrust, alienation, ignorance, and guilt do not occur only in the relationship of black people to white people. They also define relationships between black people who have different experiences of history, heritage, and belonging. He does not elaborate on the gulf of "guilt" that exists between Africans and African Americans, but it is possible to speculate about what this guilt involves. On one level, Africans may feel a sense of guilt toward African Americans because Africans are the descendants of those who escaped the transatlantic slave trade and remained connected to their homelands. On the other hand, African Americans are now implicated in Western culture in a way that Africans are not—thereby making it possible that the guilt moves in both directions.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

The "American student colony" of **Paris** is hard to describe, despite the fact that almost all of these students share the experience of having served in the war. Military service is the defining experience of an entire generation of men, and has surely had a different impact on each of them. The question of why Americans in Paris have chosen to stay in Europe instead of returning home is also far from clear. Baldwin suspects that it is not love of French history or culture that brings Americans to study in Paris, nor the promise of better teaching than they would find in the States. Baldwin argues that American students tend to cling to an image of Paris they have been taught through film, and they thereby delay discovering the city as it really is. Myths state that people lose their "heads and morals" in Paris, bathing in the city's atmosphere of freedom. However, Baldwin argues that these myths have little to do with reality.

Baldwin's exploration of the experience of American students in Paris is something of a departure from the rest of the book in that it is not based on his own experience or on issues of race and racism. At the same time, this chapter explores the same themes that occur in the rest of the book, including truth, delusion, intimacy, alienation, identity, and homelessness. His exploration of the reason why people come to Paris suggests that people's motivations are often not even clear to them. They seek an image or myth of Paris that does not necessarily correspond to reality, but that still contains meaning—at least to the Americans who believe in it.

Baldwin notes that it is easy to adore **Paris** while disliking the French, who tend to keep foreigners "at an unmistakable arm's length." Parisians tend to have little interest in the foreigners who live among them, and also tend to have less desire for the freedom and irresponsibility that Americans so enthusiastically exploit. Americans dislike being seen as indistinguishable from their countrymen, but this objection makes little sense to the French. For some Americans, the experience of freedom becomes so overwhelming that they begin to long for "the prison of home." At this point, the American develops a perverse sense of enthusiasm about the United States, which comes to him just as easily as his initial rejection of his country.

Baldwin's description of the Americans who come to Paris only to fall back in love with America is amusing. Although Baldwin gently mocks the speed with which some Americans flee from the overwhelming freedom Paris presents, he is also sympathetic to their experience. He suggests that this journey of self-discovery is a necessary and even noble process, even if it can cause people to end up running black to the place in which they started.

Baldwin also considers the case of American students who adapt perfectly to the French lifestyle, cut off all ties to the United States, and live with a French family engaging in all the same activities as a truly French person. Yet Baldwin contends that these students actually hardly know more about France than those who do not assimilate to French culture at all. They remain entrenched in stereotypes about France, and even if they have many French friends this does not help them access the reality of France, as these friends remain an undifferentiated "mob." Baldwin concludes that overall, most American students in **Paris** eventually lose a sense of their own personalities, and lose respect for other people's personalities at the same time. In their confusion, they lose sight of the task of understanding themselves and the way in which all people are products of their environments. Europe presents a singular opportunity to "discover" the United States and end the sense of alienation from themselves that all Americans, on some level, feel.

Baldwin's final comment about discovering America from Europe puts a clever twist on the narrative of Europeans "discovering" America. Now that the United States has long since been established and taken on characteristics of its own, Americans must return to Europe in order to "discover" their own identity. On a more serious level, this corresponds to Baldwin's repeated insistence that people reckon with the past in order to move forward with their lives and create positive change in the future. Only through understanding their differences from Europeans can Americans uncover an honest and accurate sense of themselves.

EQUAL IN PARIS

A year into his time in **Paris**, Baldwin is arrested for receiving stolen goods. This happens thanks to an American tourist Baldwin had met twice in New York. Baldwin is living in a "ludicrously grim" hotel, and he spends most of his days in a café where he drinks large amounts of coffee followed by large amounts of alcohol. One day the visitor from New York finds him there and complains about the state of his own hotel. Although they do not get along particularly well, Baldwin promises to find the man a room in his hotel. Baldwin had come to Paris with $40 and no knowledge of the French language or culture. At the time, he did not realize that French institutions were "outmoded, exasperating, completely impersonal, and very often cruel." When the American tourist moves into Baldwin's hotel, he steals sheets from his old hotel out of spite, and Baldwin borrows some, as his own are dirty.

Baldwin illustrates the way in which—particularly when one is in a foreign country—one comes to spend time with people in a somewhat random fashion. Baldwin does not like the American tourist particularly much, but they have a preexisting affinity simply on the basis of both being foreigners from the same place. While there are undoubtedly positive sides to this phenomenon, there are also negative ones, as this chapter will show. Baldwin's vulnerability is emphasized by the lack of money and knowledge he brought with him to Paris, an ominous sign about what is to follow.

On the night of 19th December, Baldwin is sitting alone in his room and decides to visit the American tourist. He finds two French policemen in the American's room; he doesn't understand their conversation but believes they are looking for a "gangster." However, they then ask to see Baldwin's room, and upon entering they immediately seize the other hotel's sheet and arrest Baldwin. As he and the American are led out of the hotel, Baldwin asks the policemen if the situation is very serious, and one replies: "No… It's not serious." Baldwin thinks this means he will be released before dinner, but this is not the case. He begins to feel nervous; he thinks that French policemen seem to be no better or worse than American police, but the problem with French police is that he cannot understand them. He is held overnight and he continues to miscommunicate with the police officers. The next day he is interrogated and begins to feel dizzy as a result of not having eaten for so long. He wonders how long it will take for his friends in Paris to notice he is missing.

While the French policemen do not necessarily treat Baldwin with much hostility, they are nonetheless a highly threatening presence. This is both due to them being police, and because Baldwin cannot understand what they are saying. Even when he comprehends the literal meaning of the words, this does not convey what the policemen are actually telling him. This misunderstanding is a powerful illustration of the way in which culture shapes meaning. As Baldwin shows, the way that people communicate is culturally-specific, and communication is often entirely inaccessible to people who do not belong to that culture.

Later, Baldwin is fingerprinted, and his photograph is taken. He is then driven to a prison called Fresnes, 12km outside of **Paris**. The American tourist is sent to another prison, and as soon as he is gone Baldwin misses him, because he is the only person who knows that Baldwin is telling the truth and not guilty. Everyone else in Baldwin's cell has committed only petty crimes; there are two North Africans, from whom Baldwin feels alienated. The reality of prison is far worse than what Baldwin had ever imagined. The day before Christmas Eve Baldwin is taken to trial; however, after being forced to wait in various cells, he is told that he will not in fact be tried that day. At this point, Baldwin realizes that the only person in Paris who will be able to help him is an American patent attorney for whom he used to perform administrative work. Baldwin is informed that his trial date has been set back to December 27th.

In this passage, Baldwin conveys the way in which faceless, impenetrable, and seemingly nonsensical bureaucracy can be far more dangerous and intimating than direct aggression. In situations of interpersonal conflict, it is at least usually clear why the opposing party is hostile and what they want. In the bureaucracy of the prison, Baldwin is not able to even understand what is happening to him, let alone fight against it. Whether or not he is even guilty becomes meaningless, subsumed beneath the opaque and disorganized process of awaiting his trial. There is a clear sense that, if they chose to, the authorities could simply detain him indefinitely.

An old man in Baldwin's cell, who had been arrested for petty larceny, is acquitted. As he waits to be released, he asks Baldwin if there is anything he can do for him. At first Baldwin responds "No," before giving him the phone number of the American attorney. The next day, the attorney comes to visit and promises Baldwin that everything will be all right; he will ensure Baldwin is released soon and make sure he gets a good Christmas dinner. On Christmas Day, Baldwin asks to go to mass, hoping to hear music. Instead he is placed in a grim, freezing cubicle where he listens to a priest preach about Christ's love through a slot. On the 27th, Baldwin is tried and acquitted. The story of Baldwin's case evokes laughter in the courtroom; however, this laughter makes Baldwin uneasy, as it is the laughter of people who believe they will always be at a safe remove from pain and wretchedness.

Baldwin's bizarre experience of going to "mass" in prison conveys much about Baldwin's impression of Christianity in general. The priest speaks about Christ's love, yet the wall dividing him from Baldwin—as well as Baldwin's confinement within the prison in the first place—highlights the profound lack of love that defines life within Christian countries. Rather than operating according to a logic of acceptance and forgiveness, the French nation incarcerates and punishes its inhabitants for crimes as minor as stolen hotel sheets. Particularly in this moment, Baldwin's suspicion of the church appears well-founded.

STRANGER IN THE VILLAGE

Baldwin goes to a small village in Switzerland and learns that he is the first black person to ever visit. The village is high in the mountains but not particularly inaccessible. Snow falls heavily, and the village has hot spring water which attracts tourists, most of whom are physically disabled and hope bathing in the water will heal them. Everyone in the village knows Baldwin's name and knows that he is friends with a local woman and her son in whose chalet he is staying. However, he remains a "stranger" in the eyes of the village, evidenced by the little children who shout "*Neger! Neger!*" when he passes. This never fails to shock Baldwin, though he smiles in order to appear friendly and pleasant. The villagers are extremely curious about his physical features, and some touch his hair or rub his skin to see if the color will come off. Baldwin knows the villagers do not mean to insult him, but this does not make him feel much better.

Baldwin's experience in the Swiss village is one of absolute isolation. Where a white person would likely find the village a close-knit, harmonious place, Baldwin feels a profound sense of alienation from those around him. Indeed, note the way in which the villagers treat Baldwin not only as a "stranger," but as someone who is not even human. Their curiosity about his physical features not only suggests that they think of him as some kind of exotic creature, but also that they do not understand that he has internal subjectivity like any other person. They feel no sense of shame around him, and are unconcerned about the shame he might feel.

The villagers donate money to the **church** in order to "buy" Africans and convert them to Christianity. During the Lent carnival, two children are ritually painted in blackface and solicit these donations. The wife of a bistro owner happily tells Baldwin that last year the village bought 6-8 Africans. Baldwin thinks about European missionaries who are the first white people to arrive in African villages, but he notes that this is a different phenomenon from what he experiences in the Swiss village. Because of European imperialism, the Swiss villagers "cannot be strangers anywhere in the world," no matter how unfamiliar the world might be to them. Black people feel an inevitable rage and internal turmoil in this world, while white people hold onto a privileged sense of naïveté about racism and black people's experiences. White people do not wish to be hated, but neither are they willing to give up their power. They continue to imagine black people as irredeemable "savages," which affords black people a perverse sense of freedom as well as knowledge of white people that is fundamentally unreciprocated.

From Baldwin's perspective, the villagers appear rather like children who have not yet learned about the world or become fluent in social propriety and politeness. For example, the bistro owner's wife's naïveté in imagining that Baldwin will be pleased to hear about the Africans being "bought" emerges from a total lack of understanding of Christian imperialism and the relationship of African Americans to the indigenous people of Africa. As Baldwin explains later in this passage, the woman's ignorance is not simply a matter of stupidity or lack of education. Rather, it is a product of white people's desire to hold onto their privilege and their refusal to look at the reality of the world, including the enormous injustice for which they are responsible.

Baldwin returns to the village each summer for multiple years, and the villagers grow less curious about him. Some are friendly, while some are rude and insulting behind his back. Being in the village reminds Baldwin of the fact that white Americans are in their essence "discontented Europeans." He reflects on the fact that African Americans have had their past stolen in a way that makes them unique among black people—and indeed all people—of the world. As a result, they have had to manufacture a relationship to the United States (and to the world) in order to survive. White Europeans, on the other hand, do not directly experience the full reality and legacy of colonialism; in this sense, "the black man, *as a man*, did not exist for Europe." Baldwin argues that there is more continuity between Europe and America than many believe, and that American principles and ideas did not originate in the States, but in Europe. The most important of these principles is, of course, white supremacy.

Here Baldwin offers a counter-narrative to the mainstream account of the relationship between Europe and America. The prevailing narrative of American history focuses on the experience of the settlers, who—facing persecution in Europe—fled to America in order to found a new country based on principles of freedom, equality, and democracy. However, Baldwin suggests that the more important account of the emergence of the United States should focus on the transmission of white supremacy from Europe into this new land. This is, after all, the only narrative that factors in the stories of all *Americans, not just white people.*

Although Americans have enacted white supremacy in a particularly vicious and brutal manner, they did not invent it. White Americans must find ways to live with black people in order to live with themselves, but they have thus far not succeeded in acknowledging or resolving this fact. Black Americans are *not* strangers in the West—they are of the West, and, as such, have a uniquely terrible and meaningful relationship to white Americans, their oppressors. Baldwin argues that the Chartres cathedral may "say something" to the Swiss villagers that it does not say to him, but that the reverse is also true—black Americans have a relationship to Western culture that white people cannot access or understand. White Americans harbor a fantasy of "European innocence, of returning to a state in which black men do not exist." This desire has had fatal consequences, and only now are white people beginning to realize that it can never be fulfilled. People must accept the reality that the existence of the United States has created not only a new black identity, but a new white identity. They must simultaneously reckon with the past and with the future, which "will never be white again."

The final passage of the book zooms out from Baldwin's particular experience in the Swiss village to make an overarching statement about the future of race relations across the world. Baldwin argues that white people in America are motivated by a desire to return to a (mythical) "innocence" in which black people simply do not exist, and it is for this reason that white Americans continue to exclude, oppress, and terrorize black people rather than accepting that black people are just as American as whites are. This desire for innocence is problematic in a number of ways, not least of which is the fact that it strives to ignore the crimes committed by white people against people of color, rather than holding white people accountable. However, because this innocence will never be a reality, Baldwin ends on a hopeful note that progress is inevitable.

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