Go Tell It on the Mountain

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BALDWIN

Baldwin was born at Harlem Hospital to Emma Berdis Jones in 1924. Jones left Baldwin's biological father, who was a drug addict, before Baldwin was born and married David Baldwin, a Baptist preacher. The couple had eight more children together, and Baldwin's stepfather had one son from his previous marriage as well. David Baldwin was cruel and abusive, just as Gabriel is to John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and he later died of tuberculosis when Baldwin was not yet 20. Baldwin attended Public School 24 in New York City and began writing at a young age. He wrote a play that was performed by the student body, contributed to the school newspaper, and is even credited with writing the school's official song. Like John, Baldwin was expected to become a preacher like his father, but he believed Christianity to be hypocritical and inherently racist, and he left organized religion after his teenage years. By 1948, Baldwin had already been harassed by local police because of his race, and after he was denied service in a New York City restaurant because he was black, he moved to France to escape the racism of American society. Living in Paris, Baldwin continued to write, and in 1953, he published his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, followed by *Notes of a Native Son*—a book of essays based in part on Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*—just two years later. In 1954, Baldwin won a Guggenheim Fellowship, and later that same year his third book, *Giovanni's Room*, was rejected by publishers because of its homosexual content. The novel wasn't published until 1956. During the 1960s, Baldwin was active in the American Civil Rights Movement and was personal friends with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. He agreed to write a screenplay about the life of Malcolm X, but after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, Baldwin left the project and moved back to France. He continued to write into the '70s and '80s, often exploring issues of racism and homophobia. In 1983, Baldwin accepted a professorship of Literature and African American Studies at the Five College Network in Amherst, Massachusetts, and in 1986, he was made Commandeur de la Légion D'Honneur, France's highest honor, by French President Mitterand. Baldwin died in 1987 of stomach cancer at his home in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France. He is buried at Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, John's biological father, Richard, moves from the American South to the North in 1919, during a time known historically as the Red Summer. During the spring, summer, and fall of 1919, America saw a marked increase in violence against people of color, and hundreds of African Americans were murdered, most by lynching, by white supremacists. The term "Red Summer" was coined by American writer James Weldon Johnson—widely known for his novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*—who was an early member and secretary of the NAACP. In the late winter and spring of 1919, racial tensions in America erupted, resulting in the kind of widespread fear and violence that drives Richard to the North in Baldwin's novel. On May 10, for instance, the city of Charleston, South Carolina, imposed martial law, and sailors of the United States Navy led a race riot that resulted in the deaths of over 165 black people. Similarly, police in Bisbee, Arizona, attacked the 10th U.S. Calvary, a unit of African American soldiers, on July 3. Riots and isolated lynchings spread across the nation during the Red Summer, and the violence culminated in Elaine, Arkansas, on September 30. After a white farmer was fatally shot by a group of black sharecroppers, a massive riot ensued, and when it was over, more than 200 black Americans were dead, compared to just five white Americans.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The period of Contemporary American Literature, generally accepted by scholars to have begun in 1945, was greatly shaped by novelist Richard Wright, whom Baldwin references directly in his book of essays, *Notes a Native Son*. Wright's 1945 memoir, *Black Boy*, chronicles Wright's early life in the American South and his move North to Chicago in the 1920s. Like Baldwin, Wright examines the systemic and institutionalized racism in American society, and his work has been credited with the improvement of race relations in the latter part of the twentieth century. Baldwin was also influenced by Countee Cullen, a poet and prominent Black American who came to fame during the Harlem Renaissance. Cullen wrote several books of poetry, including *Color* and *Harlem Wine*, but he is perhaps best known for the individual poems "Heritage" and "Yet Do I Marvel." Baldwin was close friends with writer Maya Angelou, and she claims he was an influence in the writing of her own autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Like *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Angelou's autobiography explores her coming of age and the trauma caused by America's racist society.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Go Tell It on the Mountain*
- **When Written:** Early 1950s
- **Where Written:** Paris, France

- **When Published:** 1953
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary American Literature
- **Genre:** Semi-autobiographical novel
- **Setting:** Harlem, New York, in 1935; as well as the American Antebellum South and Maryland in the early 1900s.
- **Climax:** John is saved on the threshing-floor of his Harlem church and becomes a man of God.
- **Antagonist:** Gabriel
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous Friends. Baldwin was close friends with Marlon Brando, the Academy Award-winning actor who played the title role in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*. Baldwin and Brando were even roommates in their youth.

And the Oscar Goes to... In 2019, actress Regina King won an Academy Award for her performance as Sharon Rivers in the film adaptation of Baldwin's 1974 novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. The 2018 adaptation was also nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay.

PLOT SUMMARY

Everyone says that John will one day grow up to be a preacher like his father, Gabriel, and John has heard this so many times that he has "come to believe it himself." Indeed, John's earliest memories are of his family and their church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized. The Pentecostal church, located on a "filthy" and "sinful" corner in Harlem, stands in stark contrast to the depravity surrounding it. John and his family pass "sinners" each Sunday on their way to church. The men and women spilling from whiskey joints and **blues** clubs embody sex and corruption, and they serve as a constant reminder to John to remain on the path of the righteous. John has not always approached his faith and religious education with the utmost seriousness and dedication, but now that he is nearing his fourteenth birthday, John feels the mounting pressure of both his family and his congregation to officially accept the Lord and renounce sin at the foot of the church's altar, known as **the threshing-floor**, and be "saved."

Focusing on the Lord is difficult for John, however. His life at home is complicated and often stressful—he has three siblings; his mother, Elizabeth, is pregnant again; and his father is abusive and cruel—and there is also Elisha. Elisha is John's Sunday school teacher, and he is young, handsome, and a preacher. John is often distracted by Elisha's "lean" body and "admires" how he looks in his suit. John is beginning to discover sex (he watches with his brother, Roy, as "sinners" have sex in an abandoned building), and he is beginning to discover his own sexuality as well. Even though John has been told it is a sin, he has recently masturbated in the bathroom at school, and when he did, he thought of boys. John is convinced he is a sinner, which makes his redemption and salvation even more pressing. When John wakes the morning after his sin in the school bathroom, which happens to be his fourteenth birthday, he feels as if he will "be bound in hell a thousand years."

On the evening of John's birthday, he goes to the Temple of the Fire Baptized to clean the church before the tarry service, where the church's congregation, or the "saints," come together to pray and wait for the Lord's salvation. It is not long before Elisha arrives to help John. As the two ready the church, the saints begin to arrive, including Gabriel and Elizabeth, and Gabriel's sister, Florence. Elisha begins the service at the piano, and the congregation comes together in song. John reluctantly sings, but he refuses to clap. He knows that the music moves the spirit of the saints, but John feels as if he has "no right to sing or rejoice." In addition to his sins, John equates God and religion with his abusive father, and John can't "bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father," which he refuses to do.

Florence, too, has difficulty singing with the saints. She has never been inside this church before, and she hasn't been inside *any* church for a very long time. At sixty years old, it is not faith that has brought Florence to God on this night, but her failing health and "fear." She is reminded of Gabriel's cherished saying: "*Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live*," and she wants to get her own house in order, so to speak, before she dies. Years spent away from God have left Florence unsure of how to pray, so she sings the only hymn she knows, a song she remembers her mother, Rachel, singing in her childhood. Gabriel is glad to see his sister come to God, but not because he is glad to see her rejoice in the Lord. Florence's presence in church means that she is "suffering," and this fills Gabriel with a strange and cruel happiness.

Florence has always resented Gabriel. As children, he was given special treatment—better food, new clothes, and an education—simply because he was a boy and would someday become a man. Their mother considered this treatment "logic." Since Florence would no doubt grow up and be someone's wife, Gabriel needed these things more than she did, although he frequently squandered his privileges. Gabriel was a mischievous child and later, as a teenager and young man, he drank and womanized. Rachel would beat him to bring him to the Lord, and then pray over his abused body. By the time he was "saved," Florence had already left their cabin in the South for the North. Florence "hates all men," not just Gabriel, and she even resented her own husband, Frank. Frank, according to Florence, was "determined to live and die a common [n____]," and he finally left her after ten years of contentious marriage. He lived for a while with another woman in town and then died in World War I. Nearly twenty years have passed since Frank's

death, and Florence considers it her "great mistake" to have loved him so "bitterly," and now it appears as if she will die alone.

As the congregation sings, Gabriel also thinks of his past and his redemption. It took him some time to come to the Lord, but he has never wanted to turn back. He began preaching at just 21 years old, and he married his first wife, Deborah, a devoted and kind woman, that same year. Together, in their holy marriage bed, Gabriel hoped to produce a "royal" line of faithful servants to the Lord. Deborah, however, died "barren," and Gabriel fathered a "bastard son" with Esther, a local woman whom Gabriel considered "a harlot." Esther died not long after giving birth, and her son, Royal, was raised by her parents. Gabriel watched, estranged, as his son grew, until Royal was stabbed to death in Chicago as a young man. According to Gabriel, he has repented for his infidelity, and his treatment of Esther and Royal, and the Lord has forgiven him. Gabriel's name is "written in the Book of Life," he says, and he will live in eternal glory with the Lord.

As Gabriel thinks of his past, John is taken by the spirit and makes his way to the threshing-floor. The sound of John's cries takes Elizabeth back to when he was born, and to the death of John's biological father, Richard. Elizabeth and Richard were never married, and Richard committed suicide before John was born, leaving Elizabeth alone to bear the burden of her own "bastard son." When she met Gabriel, he promised to love John like his own, but he has failed. He treats *all* their children badly, but especially John, and Elizabeth is sure that both she and John are being punished for her sin. She watches with pride as John gives himself to the Lord on the threshing-floor, through which he unburdens his sins to God and his redeemed. After his spiritual rebirth, John is filled with inexplicable joy, even though he knows this new holy path is a difficult and "narrow way" up a steep and treacherous **mountain** filled with sin and temptation. John is nevertheless committed to this path, and as he leaves the church with his family and walks into the bright morning light, he is "ready" for the challenge. "I'm coming," John says, "I'm on my way."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John – Elizabeth and Richard's son, Gabriel's stepson, and the protagonist of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Elizabeth gives birth to John out of wedlock after Richard's suicide and Gabriel is not his biological father, but John doesn't know this. John is raised under the oppressive and abusive hand of Gabriel and is made to believe he is "ugly" and that he has "the face of Satan." John and his siblings aren't allowed to play outside or go to the movies, and their lives consist only of church, school, and prayer. It is expected that John will be a preacher like Gabriel when he grows up, but he hates the oppressive life Gabriel's religion requires, and he doesn't know if he wants to dedicate his life to such a "narrow" existence. Plus, John is obviously attracted to Elisha, his Sunday school teacher and a preacher at his church, but Christianity tells John that his sexuality makes him evil. John is unhappy and incredibly conflicted when he wakes on his fourteenth birthday. He believes he has already sinned by masturbating in the school bathroom, and he fears that his soul will be damned to Hell for eternity. Religion is not a source of comfort or joy in John's life but a source of anguish and oppression, and Baldwin repeatedly draws attention to this. John goes to his church the night of his fourteenth birthday for tarry service, and there he finds himself on **the threshing floor** where he is held before God in judgement. John ultimately rises through the darkness and is saved, and it is in this way that Baldwin argues John isn't a sinner after all. Gabriel believes that John is inherently evil because he is a "bastard," but the fact that God stands in judgement over John and finds him righteous suggests that he isn't inherently evil, by way of his birth or his sexuality. Through the character of John, Baldwin argues that true morality does not need to be confined to the "narrow way" of religion.

Gabriel – The antagonist in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and John's stepfather. Gabriel is born to Rachel, a former slave, in the American South during the Reconstruction Era. Gabriel grows up under the indignity and violence of Jim Crow, and he deeply resents white people. He is a preacher, and thus the personification of Christianity in the book. In his youth, Gabriel drank and frequented whorehouses, but he was finally brought to his knees one morning after leaving "a harlot" and is saved by the grace of God. He soon marries Deborah, a local woman who bears the "disgrace" of a rape. Despite her "history," Deborah is the holiest woman in town, which helps Gabriel "to stand," or remain holy, so he decides to marry her. He believes marrying Deborah will "raise her up" and "release her from" the "dishonor" of her rape. Gabriel's rationale for marrying Deborah reveals his own misogyny as well as society's, and he further disrespects Deborah when he cheats on her with Esther, a woman he considers "a harlot." Esther ends up pregnant and dies after giving birth to a son named Royal. Gabriel rejects both Esther and her child, claiming she is whore who will drag him into sin. Of course, Baldwin implies that it is Gabriel who is the sinner, and his despicable behavior continues with Elizabeth and John. Gabriel marries Elizabeth to, in a way, "release" her from the "dishonor" of giving birth to John out of wedlock, and while Gabriel promises to love them, he barely tries. He continually holds them both responsible for the circumstances of John's birth, and while Gabriel mistreats all his children, he is especially cruel to John. He beats his sons and slaps Elizabeth while she is pregnant, and despite being a preacher and allegedly saved by God, Gabriel is little more than a miserable sinner. It is through Gabriel that Baldwin argues that one can be both religious and sinful, and that religion, while

often a source of comfort for people, can also be a source of oppression and pain.

Elizabeth – Gabriel's wife, and mother to John, Roy, Sarah, and Ruth. After Elizabeth's mother dies when Elizabeth is just eight years old, Elizabeth's aunt insists that Elizabeth's father, who runs a "house" of ill repute, is an unfit father, and she forces Elizabeth to move to Maryland to live with her. Elizabeth's aunt is cruel for no reason and treats Elizabeth badly. Elizabeth is miserable until she meets Richard, a young and "nervous" black man from the South whom she quickly falls in love with. Elizabeth and Richard move North to New York, hoping to escape the violence and racism of the South, and it isn't long before Elizabeth is pregnant. Society and Elizabeth's religion insist that she is immoral because she has had sex out of wedlock, and while she wants to marry Richard, she doesn't want to pressure him. She keeps her pregnancy a secret, and he later kills himself after being falsely accused and tried for robbing a "white man's store." Elizabeth is left feeling ashamed and responsible. She believes Richard wouldn't have killed himself had he known about the baby, and she still has to contend with the fact that society considers her a harlot and a sinner because her baby is a "bastard." John is later born, and Elizabeth struggles to care for him herself until Gabriel comes along and promises to love them both. Of course, he doesn't, and he uses both Elizabeth and John to try to make up for his own sins and shortcomings. Gabriel repeatedly makes Elizabeth and John feel like evil sinners because of the circumstance of John's birth, and Baldwin draws attention to the tragedy of the sexist assumptions that having a child out of wedlock makes both woman and child evil sinners. Elizabeth and John are both exceptional people, held up to impossible standards by a hypocritical religion that, Baldwin implies, only seeks to oppress them. Through the character of Elizabeth, Baldwin argues that sex outside of marriage does not make one immoral—Elizabeth loved Richard, and she deeply loves John, and there is nothing sinful about that.

Florence – Gabriel's sister, Rachel's daughter, and Frank's wife. Florence grows up resenting her brother and all men because her mother gives Gabriel preferential treatment. Rachel gives Gabriel better food and better clothes, and he even gets to go to school. Rachel assumes that Florence will grow up to be a housewife, which means she doesn't need an education, but Florence rejects this sexist, limiting plan for her life. She wants to move North where there is more opportunity, find a better job, and maybe go to school. Florence eventually moves North, where she marries Frank, a man who "drinks too much" and "sings **the blues**," and she never finds happiness. She rejects her brother's religion and struggles with this decision, and she is plagued by internalized racism. She refers to her husband as a "common [n____]" and bleaches her dark skin. Despite this, Florence is active in Uplift meetings and advocates for the betterment of African Americans. She listens to "prominent Negros" speak, and she encourages Frank to do the same. Their marriage, however, doesn't last, and Frank leaves her after ten years of marriage. Florence lives the rest of her life alone and bitter, and by the time she finds her way to John's Harlem church on the night of his fourteenth birthday, she is already dying. Florence fears what will come of her soul when she dies, and she comes to church to get her spiritual "house in order." Florence also goes to church to confront Gabriel and finally hold him accountable for his sins and poor treatment of every single person in his life. Florence has been holding a letter from Gabriel's first wife, Deborah, for over thirty years, and she believes it to be an "instrument" for Gabriel's "destruction." Florence finally confronts Gabriel and condemns him as a sinner, reaching some level of closure before leaving him for the last time.

Richard – Elizabeth's fiancé and John's biological father. Richard moves to Maryland in 1919, escaping the deep-seated racial violence in the South for the promise of opportunity in the North. He works as a clerk in the store Elizabeth frequents with her aunt, and Elizabeth notices him immediately. He is described as "beautiful" and "nervous." He is "sullen" and "barely polite" to his customers, which speaks to the level of Richard's exhaustion. As a black man, Richard was treated as a second-class citizen in the South. He has seen violence and knows real fear, and he is tired and incredibly angry. He tries to regain some of the power white America has taken from him by honing his intellect. Through his intelligence, Richard tries to prove he is as good as everyone else, and he looks to move farther North yet in search of more opportunities to better himself. He convinces Elizabeth to move to New York with him and she agrees, and they move to Harlem and work in the same hotel. Richard and Elizabeth are happy together and plan on getting married, and while Richard doesn't know it, she is already pregnant with his child. Richard is arrested late one night while waiting for a subway train. A group of black men runs up to him after robbing a "white man's store," and Richard is arrested right along with them. He tells the racists police and store owner that he was not with the offenders, but they "make no distinction" between Richard and the other black men. The police beat him and imprison him for weeks as he awaits trial, and while he is ultimately released, the damage is already done. Richard commits suicide immediately after getting out of jail, the weight of his racist society too much to bear. Through Richard, Baldwin argues the futility in trying to overcome racism in America. Richard moves across the country and learns as much as he possibly can to get the respect of white people, and he dies trying.

Deborah – Florence's closest friend and Gabriel's first wife. As a young girl, Deborah is brutally raped by a group of white men, and because of this, her community looks at her with "reproach" as if she is a "harlot." Deborah's poor treatment reflects America's sexist society. She is assaulted and raped

through no fault of her own, yet she is the one who is punished not her rapists. Deborah's rapists "robbed her of the right to be considered a woman," and as a result, she resents men. Society assumes that women must be pure and sexually untainted, and Deborah's tragic experience means that she is no longer a woman in their eyes. Deborah is convinced that "all men" are awful, and that "they live only to gratify on the bodies of women their brutal and humiliating needs," which indeed proves to be the case with many of the men in Baldwin's novel. Because of Deborah's rape, she dedicates her life to God, "like a terrible example of humility, or like a holy fool." Deborah is kind and tends to the sick, she is helpful to others, and she even tells Gabriel that she would have accepted Royal as her own regardless of what others said. Deborah is a good and righteous woman—the "greatest saint" and "the Lord's peculiar treasure and most holy vessel"—yet she is viewed as wicked because of her rape. She dies halfway through the novel of a chronic and nondescript illness. Through Deborah, Baldwin simultaneously argues that Deborah's rape is not a mark against her own morality but against her rapists, and that sex and morality are not mutually exclusive.

Rachel – Florence and Gabriel's mother. Rachel is born a slave on a Southern plantation and is not liberated until she is over thirty years old. Rachel's life as a slave is full of heartache. She buries one husband and is left by another, and she has four children and loses them all. She is beaten and raped and forced to work nearly every day. After the Civil War, Rachel leaves the plantation and never looks back. She refers to Gabriel and Florence as "the children of her old age" because she had them much later than her other children. Rachel treats Gabriel better than Florence because he is a "manchild," which reflects the sexist nature of their patriarchal society, and Florence deeply resents both her mother and her brother because of this. Gabriel, however, is a sinful child, and Rachel frequently beats him to bring him to God. Rachel dies of a vague illness after Florence moves to the North and Gabriel accepts God and is saved. Rachel manages to live long enough to see her son kneel before God, which is her final hope and prayer. Rachel serves to illustrate the cruelty of slavery, but Rachel's character also illustrates how slavery impacts subsequent generations. The pain and fear of racism and slavery are not gone simply because slavery is abolished. This trauma lives on in ensuing generations, and Rachel's children and grandchildren are proof of this.

Elisha – Father James's nephew and a young preacher in John's Harlem church. Elisha is handsome and kind, and John is very obviously attracted to him. John looks up to Elisha because he is young but still saved and a preacher, and he is John's primary role model. Father James publicly condemns Elisha after church one day for "walking disorderly" with Ella Mae, even though their relationship was innocent and nothing inappropriate happened. Father James's criticism of Elisha reflects the oppressive nature of religion and the assumption that to engage in sex before marriage means that one is also a sinner. Father James makes an example out of Elisha, even though he hadn't sinned, and Elisha never again spends time with Ella Mae. Their friendship suffers because of religion, which, Baldwin suggests, should enhance and enrich relationships not destroy them. Despite Father James's criticism, however, Elisha is an exceedingly holy man, and when he goes to **the threshing-floor**, he is so moved by the Holy Spirit that he speaks in tongues. Elisha is at the church the night John is saved on the threshing-floor, and he helps John through the darkness with prayer.

Esther – Royal's mother and Gabriel's mistress. Gabriel has an affair with Esther while he is married to Deborah, and this affair results in Royal's birth. Gabriel associates Esther with "flame" and "the eternal fires of Hell." She is frequently seen walking with other men, and Gabriel assumes she is a "harlot." Esther is beautiful and independent, and while she has male friends, she isn't promiscuous. Gabriel, however, treats her like a whore and claims that her womb is a "forbidden darkness" where his "holy seed" will die. Gabriel assumes that Esther is immoral and a sinner, yet there is no evidence of this outside of her neglect of church. After Esther becomes pregnant, Gabriel steals money from Deborah and sends Esther away to Chicago, where she later dies after giving birth to Royal. Before Esther dies, she writes Gabriel a letter in which she condemns him for his treatment of her and claims she doesn't need God to "know right from wrong." This seems to be Baldwin's overarching argument, and the character of Esther proves that one does not have to be religious to also be moral.

Roy – Elizabeth and Gabriel's son and John's brother. Presumably, Roy is short for Royal, a name Gabriel gives his son "because the line of the faithful [is] a royal line," and his son is "a royal child." Roy, however, is not religious, and he frequently gets into trouble. He serves as a foil to John, who by comparison is restrained and dedicated. Roy runs with a rough crowd of boys and claims to have "done it" with some girls around the corner. Everyone believes that "if the Lord does not change [Roy's] heart," he will grow up to be a sinner, and Gabriel frequently beats him to bring him to God. Roy's forehead is slashed after he gets into a fight with some white boys, but he is not seriously hurt.

Royal – Gabriel's "bastard son" with Esther. After Esther dies, Royal is raised by his grandparents, never knowing his father. Esther names her son Royal to "mock" Gabriel, who wants to name his first son Royal "because the line of the faithful [is] a royal line" and "his son would be a royal child." Gabriel turns his back on Esther and Royal because he believes Esther to be a "harlot" and her womb a "forbidden darkness." Gabriel thinks that "his holy seed" is wasted on Royal, and he denies the child his entire life. Royal goes North to Chicago as a young man and is killed when his throat is slashed by some "northern [n____s]."

Frank – Florence's ex-husband. According to Florence, Frank is "determined to live and die a common [n____]." Frank "drinks too much" and "sings the blues." He is never able to buy Florence a house, or anything else for that matter, and he frequently wastes their money on "useless objects." Aside from his financial irresponsibility, Frank is not altogether a bad man, although he does disregard Florence when she refuses him sex. Frank's disregard of Florence suggests that he believes sex is something that is owed to him that she has no right to refuse, and this is in keeping with the misogyny that pervades most of the novel. Florence claims that it was her "great mistake" to love Frank so "bitterly," and he leaves her after ten years of marriage. He lives briefly with another woman in town and then dies in France during World War I.

Elizabeth's Father – A "young and handsome" man, who is also "kind" and "generous." Like Elizabeth, her father is "dark," and he is "gentle" and "proud." Elizabeth is "the apple of his eye," and he treats his daughter like "a queen." Elizabeth's father teaches her to never let the world see her cry and to "never ask for mercy." He runs "a house," which, according to Elizabeth's aunt, is full of "wicked people." Presumably, he runs a whorehouse, and because of this, Elizabeth's aunt considers him unfit to raise a daughter. Elizabeth's aunt considers him immoral because of the sexual nature of his employment and takes Elizabeth away from her loving father. After Elizabeth is forced to move to Maryland with her aunt, she never sees him again, and her childhood is ruined. Baldwin implies that Elizabeth's father is a good man, and his job and its relation to sex do not alone make him an immoral sinner.

Elizabeth's Mother – Elizabeth's mother dies when Elizabeth is just eight years old. She is described as "very fair, and beautiful," and her health is fragile. Elizabeth hardly knows her mother, and she "never loved her." Elizabeth's mother frequently cries, and she smells of "stale milk." She refers to Elizabeth as "an unnatural child," presumably because of Elizabeth's dark skin. Elizabeth believes that she isn't beautiful like her mother because her skin is too dark, which reflects racists assumptions in America that black women can't be beautiful.

Elizabeth's Aunt – The older sister of Elizabeth's mother. Elizabeth's aunt insists that Elizabeth move to Maryland to live with her after Elizabeth's mother dies. Elizabeth's aunt had loved the girl's mother, but she doesn't love Elizabeth, and she treats her niece badly. Elizabeth refers to her aunt as "second" in as "series of disasters" that ruined her childhood. Elizabeth's aunt believes that Elizabeth's father, who runs "a house"—presumably a whorehouse—is not a "fit person to raise a child." Elizabeth's aunt assumes that Elizabeth's father is immoral because his job involves sex, and therefore sin, and even though he is a good father and treats Elizabeth exceedingly well, Elizabeth is forced to leave him. Elizabeth's aunt is a pious woman who diligently worships God, but she is cruel and judgmental, like Gabriel, which Baldwin implies is a sin as well.

Father James – The preacher at John's church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized, and Elisha's uncle. Gabriel is the "head deacon" at the church, but it is Father James who preaches on Sundays and leads revivals. Father James is highly respected by his congregation, and he takes his "duty" as the leader of their "flock" very seriously. He believes the "way of holiness" and "the Word" is a "hard way," and he claims celibacy until marriage is what is "demanded" by the "the way of the cross." Father James calls out Elisha and Ella Mae after church one Sunday, and in front of the entire congregation, he accuses the young friends of "walking disorderly." Elisha and Ella Mae had been innocently spending time together, but according to Father James, they "were in danger of "straying from the truth" by "plucking" the "unripe fig" from the tree "too early." Father James's public warning to Ella Mae and Elisha helps the establish the connection between sex and sin in the novel.

Ella Mae – Mother Washington's granddaughter and a member of John's Harlem church. Father James condemns Ella Mae publicly after church services for "walking disorderly" with Elisha. Ella Mae and Elisha's relationship was entirely innocent, but after Father James's denouncement, she no longer spends time with Elisha. Ella Mae is at the Fire of the Temple Baptized the night John is saved on **the threshing-floor**.

Sister McCandless – A member of the Temple of the Fire Baptized. Sister McCandless is "one of the biggest and blackest [women] God has ever made," and she has a loud, booming voice that is perfect for preaching and praying. She travels the nation with the other preachers and spreads the word of God. She is one of the holiest members of John's church, and she is present the night John is saved on **the threshing-floor**.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sister Price – A member of John's Harlem church. Sister Price is at the Temple of the Fire Baptized on John's fourteenth birthday when he is saved on **the threshing-floor**.

Mother Washington – Ella Mae's grandmother, who is a member of John's Harlem church. Mother Washington "helps" Florence to pray when she comes to the Temple of the Fire Baptized for the first time.

Madame Williams – Elizabeth's distant relative in Harlem. When Elizabeth moves North to be with Richard, she moves in with Madame Williams, "a respectable female relative." Madame Williams constantly burns incense and holds "spiritualists séances" on Saturday nights.

Sarah – Elizabeth and Gabriel's daughter and John's younger sister. Baldwin writes that Gabriel "fondles" his daughter, and, presumably, it is Sarah whom he abuses.

Ruth – Elizabeth and Gabriel's infant daughter and John's baby sister.

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.

FAITH AND RELIGION

Religion is at the center of James Baldwin's semiautobiographical novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The book's title is a reference to a popular African American spiritual **song** about the birth of Jesus, and many of Baldwin's characters carry biblical connotations and parallels. The novel follows protagonist John—so named for Saint John the Baptist—and his evolution from an adolescent sinner to a saved man of God. Like the Christian Bible, which includes the Old Testament and the New Testament, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* examines both the wrath of God against sin and God's grace towards those who sin and repent. Despite this deeply religious message, however, Baldwin does not exactly portray religion in a positive way. Religion is often associated with violence in the novel, and it is primarily a source of fear and internal anguish and struggle. While *Go Tell It on the Mountain* doesn't deny that faith in God can be a source of comfort and salvation in a world full of hardship and pain, the book is also openly critical of Christianity, which Baldwin implies is often corrupted and used to justify terrible atrocities.

John's father, Gabriel, is a preacher in a Harlem church, and he serves as the personification of Christianity in the novel. Baldwin describes Gabriel as "God's minister" and "the ambassador of the King of Heaven," and John can't "bow before [God's] throne of grace without first kneeling to his father." In this way, Gabriel is the official gatekeeper of God, and John can only access God's salvation through his father. John, however, hates his father. He claims his father's face is "always awful," and he likens Gabriel's outbursts of "daily anger" to a "prophetic wrath." Gabriel beats his sons and "fondles" his daughter and is generally portrayed as a thoroughly horrible man. Gabriel supposedly lives a life of religious piety, yet he is abusive and mean, and this reflects badly on his professed religion. In addition to the poor treatment of his family, Gabriel has major skeletons in his closet and has a history of drinking and womanizing. According to Gabriel's sister, Florence, Gabriel "ain't got no right to be a preacher. He ain't no better'n nobody else." This rather negative portrayal of Gabriel, whom Baldwin also describes as "the anointed one," has the effect of making Christianity appear not only violent and cruel, but also hypocritical.

The negative portrayal of religion continues as Baldwin explore how religion is often used as justification for inexcusable behavior and past events. As a child, Gabriel was reluctant to be baptized, and he frequently got into trouble. Gabriel's mother, Rachel, took to beating him with a switch from a tree: she often beat her son in the name of God (a tradition Gabriel continues with his own sons), and then prayed over his abused body when he could no longer stand. Baldwin exposes this behavior for what it really is—child abuse masquerading as religious devotion and spiritual discipline. Gabriel also tries to justify his actions through Christianity: as a young man, Gabriel had an affair with Esther, a local "harlot," and fathered her child. Gabriel, a married preacher, sent her away to spare his religious standing in the community. Esther died alone during childbirth; which Florence believes makes Gabriel "a murderer." Gabriel turned his back on Esther and their child, Royal, because of his religion, and Baldwin implies that this is a poor excuse. Baldwin also references the biblical curse of Ham, which is frequently cited to justify slavery in America. As the story goes, Noah was drunk and passed out in a tent when his son, Ham, gazed upon his father's naked body. As punishment for Ham's decision, Noah cursed Ham's son, Canaan, and all his descendants to slavery. "Ah, that son of Noah's had been cursed," Baldwin writes, "down to the present groaning generation: *A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren*." In referencing the story of Ham, Baldwin argues that slavery, a particularly shameful stain on America, cannot be justified with what amounts to a few lines of biblical text.

Regardless of this negative depiction of religion, faith in God remains an essential part of many of the characters' lives. Baldwin's characters must endure the unrelenting pain of slavery and segregation, and their faith in God's salvation is the proverbial light at the end of a very dark tunnel. This belief is reflected in the climax of the novel, when John is saved at the altar of his Harlem church. "Elisha," John says to his friend after his spiritual transformation, "no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what *any*body says, you remember—please remember—I was saved. I was *there*." John knows his life will be difficult—his father will still beat him, and he will always be subjected to the discrimination of Jim Crow—but he has faith that he will spend eternity in glory with God.

SEX AND MORALITY

As *Go Tell It on the Mountain* focuses on God and religion, it also examines sin and morality, and sex and sin go hand in hand in Baldwin's novel. The Old Testament identifies "fornication," or sex outside of marriage, as a direct sin against God, and this belief is reflected throughout *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Sex is a constant threat to the morality of Baldwin's characters, and those who partake in sex out of wedlock are consumed by guilt and deep religious shame. To indulge in sex for reasons other than procreation is

considered immoral and abject, and those who commit this sin are likewise considered wicked; however, many of Baldwin's characters who are tainted by sexual sin are otherwise righteous and good people. As the novel unfolds, Baldwin ultimately implies that sex outside of marriage isn't the worst sin that one can commit—if it is even a sin at all—and he ultimately argues that having or abstaining from sex is a poor indicator of one's morality. In this vein, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* forces the reader to reconsider what, and who, they typically view as moral or immoral.

From the outset, sex is established as a sin in the world of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Father James, the preacher at John's church, publicly condemns Elisha, a young man and fellow preacher, for spending time with Ella Mae, another young church member. Elisha and Ella Mae are "walking disorderly," Father James says, and "in danger of straying from the truth." Father James fears they are in peril of plucking "the unripe fig" "too early from the tree." Even the mere possibility of sex is enough to bring their morality into question. John, too, claims to have sinned: "[John] had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone." John doesn't have sex per se but "sins" in the form of masturbation, which he believes is nearly unforgivable. Sin is intimately linked with sex in Baldwin's novel, so much so that even the implication of sex, be it through masturbation or adolescent crushes, is enough to render one a sinner and morally deficient, but Baldwin appears to disagree. John is not morally deficient, and neither are Elisha and Ella Mae, and their tangential, and rather innocent, relationship to sex is not enough to make them immoral.

Many of the central characters struggle with their perceived sexual sins. Religion tells them sex outside of marriage is a mortal sin that must be atoned, and many of the characters struggle with the moral implications of their sexual pasts. When Deborah, who later becomes Gabriel's first wife, is brutally raped by a group of white men, she becomes "a living reproach" to her community. Even though she was raped and thereby violently forced into sex, she is still "looked on as a harlot." To atone for this alleged sin, Deborah devotes her entire life to God, "like a terrible example of humility, or like a holy fool," but Baldwin implies that this atonement isn't necessary. Deborah was an innocent victim in her rape, and she is an exceedingly kind and righteous woman. In fact, Deborah's community is convinced she is "the greatest saint among them, the Lord's peculiar treasure and most holy vessel." Deborah's rape, Baldwin implies, has absolutely no real bearing on her morality. Gabriel's second wife, Elizabeth, also struggles with sexual sin. She enters a sexual relationship with her fiancé, Richard, and after he dies, she is left pregnant and alone. Elizabeth believes that "God had taken [Richard] from her" as payment for her sin of "lust," of which her "bastard son," John, is an "heir." But, Baldwin implies, God didn't really "take" Richard from Elizabeth as punishment for her sin: he committed suicide after he was falsely accused of robbery and imprisoned by his racist society. Furthermore, Elizabeth and Richard were in a loving and committed relationship, and she was by no means promiscuous. Elizabeth only believes she has sinned because she believes what her religion says about sex—that *any* sex out of wedlock and the children it may produce are mortal sins that must be repented—but through Elizabeth and Deborah, Baldwin challenges this perspective.

The relationship between sex and morality is further complicated with the implication of John's homosexuality. When he masturbates in the school bathroom, he thinks of boys, and when he watches Elisha preach at church, he admires how Elisha's suit hangs on his "lean" and "strong" body. John "never dares to speak" of "the darkness of [his] sin," which the Bible also identifies as a mortal sin, but he spends much of his time trying to atone for it. He prays and attends church regularly, excels in school and doesn't associate with neighborhood troublemakers. He is kind and a good son to his mother, and, Baldwin thereby contends, John's sexuality does *not* make him immoral, just as it is not Gabriel's sexual history that makes him wicked but his self-righteousness and unthinkable cruelty instead. Ultimately, Baldwin's exploration of sex and morality in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* challenges basic assumptions of sex and sin and forces the reader to assess morality based on a much broader—and more nuanced—spectrum, not simply in terms of sex or sexuality.

RACE AND RACISM

James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is set in Harlem in 1935, some twenty years into America's Great Migration. After the Civil War and the end of slavery in 1865, the country entered the Reconstruction Era, in which African Americans were finally afforded freedom and equality under the constitution. In practice, though, people of color continued to be treated with widespread discrimination, exploitation, and abuse, especially in the South—thus began the Great Migration, or the mass exodus of African Americans from the South to the North. While the bulk of Baldwin's novel takes place in 1935, he examines race and racism in the Antebellum South, through Reconstruction, and finally North with the Great Migration, and he explores how slavery affects people of color from generation to generation. Through this exploration of race and racism in America, Baldwin argues that while slavery may be a thing of the past, its consequences have resonated far into the future.

Gabriel tells the story of his mother, Rachel, who was a slave for over thirty years in the American South. Rachel, who was born on a plantation, saw many "tribulations" throughout her life, most notably "death, and parting, and the lash." Rachel and the other slaves were forced to endure savage beatings and even murder simply because they were black and deemed inferior to their white "masters." Rachel was made to rise "in the morning

before the sun came up" and work all day in the fields, only to be fed "bits of ham and chicken and cake left over by the white folks." Rachel toiled all day long making money for her master and was given left over kitchen scraps like a dog. Before slavery was abolished, Rachel had four children, "all of whom had been taken from her, one by sickness and two by auction; and one, whom she had not been allowed to call her own, had been raised in the master's house." Not only was Rachel made to endure the selling of her children into slavery, she was also raped by her master and then denied the child produced by that rape, as the child was considered white and not black. Rachel had to bear unimaginable suffering because of slavery and racism, and as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* goes on to show, this suffering did not end simply because slavery was later abolished.

The deep-seated racism produced by American slavery even plagues Rachel's children who are born after the Civil War, which is reflected most clearly in Rachel's daughter, Florence. Florence despises her younger brother, Gabriel, and cries, "I hate him! I hate him! Big, black, prancing tomcat of a [n____]!" Deborah, Florence's closest friend and Gabriel's future wife, reminds Florence that "the Word tell us to hate the sin but not the sinner." With this, Deborah implies that Gabriel's blackness is a sin, and her opinion reflects how deeply racism affects Americans, as it is even internalized by black people themselves. Later in life, Florence bleaches her skin because she assumes that Frank, her husband, doesn't "want a coal-black woman." Frank believes that "black is a mighty pretty color," but Florence disagrees. Florence's opinion also reflects the racist assumptions of Reconstruction Era America, and because of this, she doesn't believe that she can be both black and beautiful. Likewise, Florence frequently refers to black men as "common [n____s]," the "lowest of low," who "drink cheap moonshine, and play music all night long" and "do worse things" that "are far better left unsaid"—in other words, she equates blackness with criminality and depravity, and this, too, reflects the racist stereotypes of early twentieth-century America.

Gabriel's son, John, must endure racism in the North in 1935 as well. Segregation has relegated John to "the back door, and the dark stairs, and the kitchen or basement," yet the ugliness of racism in America is most apparent in the story of Richard, John's biological father. Richard moved North in 1919, and he quickly discovered that while the North "promised" more to African Americans, "what it promised it did not give, and what it gave, at length and grudgingly with one hand, it took back with the other." Richard was falsely accused, arrested, and tried for "robbing a white man's store" simply because he was black and in the wrong place at the wrong time. Although he was eventually found innocent, Richard committed suicide immediately after his release from jail, the racism of "the white city, the white world" too heavy a burden. It is through this tragic and multigenerational look at racism in America that Baldwin implies slavery, while technically over, has produced a legacy of racism and pain that has not lessened with time and continues to affect black people across America.

GENDER, THE PATRIARCHY, AND MISOGYNY

Traditional gender roles are clearly defined from the very beginning of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. When John attends his Harlem church on Sunday mornings, "the women all seem patient," and "all the men seem mighty." Women are considered fragile and dependent upon men, and the men who head the patriarchal families are often cruel and abusive. According to Florence, John's aunt, "ain't no woman born that don't get walked over by some no-count man." Florence's obvious resentment of men continues throughout the novel, and after John's biological father, Richard, dies, Florence tells John's mother, Elizabeth, that "the menfolk, they die, and its over for them, but we women, we have to keep on living and try to forget what they done to us." Richard commits suicide after he is falsely arrested and tried for robbery, a victim of America's racist society that considers *all* black men criminal. Black women in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* must endure the oppression of a racist society as well, but they must also endure the oppression of a sexist society—and often at the hands of black men—which Baldwin argues is doubly tragic.

The oppression of women is reflected in Elizabeth's marriage to Gabriel, John's stepfather, who, as the family's patriarch, rules his wife and family with an iron fist. Often, John and his family are late for church on Sunday mornings, and "this lateness is always [Elizabeth's] fault—at least in the eyes of [Gabriel]; she cannot seem to get herself and the children ready on time, ever." Not only does Gabriel assume that Elizabeth is solely responsible for their children, he resents her when she isn't able to handle them on her own, which is no doubt an impossible task. After Roy, Gabriel and Elizabeth's son, is stabbed while running with a bad crowd, Gabriel blames Elizabeth for allowing Roy to run wild. Elizabeth, who is pregnant at the time, attempts to stand up for herself and demands Gabriel take some responsibility for Roy's behavior. Suddenly, "with all his might, [Gabriel] reaches out and slaps her across the face." Gabriel physically abuses his pregnant wife in this instance simply because she challenges his authority. Elizabeth must also contend with Gabriel's punishment because John is not his biological son. Elizabeth became pregnant with John out of wedlock before she met Gabriel, and both Gabriel and their sexist society hold Elizabeth exclusively responsible for her pregnancy, not the man who impregnated her. Because Elizabeth never married John's biological father, she risked being branded a "harlot," and Gabriel agreed to marry Elizabeth to spare her this scorn. But Gabriel mistreats Elizabeth and their children, and because of this, her "thoughts are bitter."

Florence, Gabriel's older sister, also reflects the way women are severely oppressed in the novel. As Gabriel "was a manchild," Florence was made to "sacrifice" from the moment of his birth. Rachel, Gabriel and Florence's mother, "did not, indeed, think of it as sacrifice, but as logic." Since Gabriel was born a boy, he was given priority in their household. As a boy, Gabriel would eventually be expected "to do a man's work," and Rachel reasoned "he needed, therefore, meat, when there was any in the house, and clothes, whenever clothes could be bought." Florence was denied all the things her brother was given—including an education, even though "Florence desired [it] far more than he"—simply because she was born a girl and thus forced to play second fiddle. Because of this, Florence "hates all men" and believes "that all women have been cursed from the cradle; all, in one fashion or another, being given the same cruel destiny, born to suffer the weight of men." Particularly, Florence believes that black men are guilty of oppressing women, and she tells Elizabeth, "I don't believe the [n____'s] been born that knows how to treat a woman right." No man is immune to Florence's resentment of the patriarchy.

Black and white men alike oppress women in Baldwin's novel, and after Florence's friend, Deborah, is brutally raped by a group of white men, she begins to hate men too. Deborah's "violated body" becomes "a living reproach," and she is "looked on as a harlot." Deborah alone is punished for her rape, not the men who rape her, and this, in addition to Florence's vehement hatred for men, "reinforces in Deborah the terrible belief against which no evidence had ever presented itself: that all men were like this, their thoughts rose no higher, and they lived only to gratify on the bodies of women their brutal and humiliating needs." While Baldwin is quick to point out that "no evidence" exists to prove the fact that "all men" oppress women, several of his male characters abuse and subjugate women, which supports his overarching argument that women frequently, and unfairly, suffer at the hands of men.

SYMBOLS

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

MOUNTAINS

Mountains are symbolic of the "narrow" and difficult way of the holy life in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Indeed, mountains are named directly in Baldwin's title, and he repeatedly references them throughout the novel. The morning that Gabriel falls to his knees and is saved by the Lord, he is in "that valley where his mother [Rachel] had told him he would find himself," beyond anyone's help but God's. Gabriel's spiritual transformation occurs at the foot of a small mountain, at the top of which sits Rachel's cabin, near a tree he passes each morning on his way home from nights spent with "harlots." The tree marks the point "between sins committed and sins to be committed"—at the top of the mountain is the holy home of his mother, and at the bottom, past the tree, are the sins of whiskey and women. When Gabriel is saved that morning by the tree, the mountain symbolizes the uphill climb Gabriel has in resisting sin and remaining holy.

When John climbs the mountain in Central Park and looks down on the city Gabriel has warned him will only lead his soul to "perdition," John stops at the "summit." The people below bear the "marks of Satan," and the movie houses "invite people to sin." At the bottom of the mountain is sin and immorality, and at the top is righteousness. "If it's wrong, I can always climb back up," John thinks to himself as he runs down the mountain. Similarly, as Elizabeth repents and is saved after the birth of her "bastard son," John, she begins an "upward climb—upward, with her baby, on the steep, steep side of the mountain." As Gabriel says, the holy way "ain't all in the sinning and the shouting—the way of holiness is a hard way," and even after John himself is saved on the **threshing-floor** of their Harlem church, Gabriel claims John still "got the steep side of the mountain to climb." Being saved by God is no simple task, the story suggests, and remaining saved is just as difficult. The "narrow way" of "eternal life" is littered with sin and temptation, and mountains signify the trials of resisting this temptation.

MUSIC

Music takes on a twofold meaning in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: depending on the genre, music represents both morality and immorality, redemption and sin. On the one hand, hymns and gospel songs—artifacts of religion—represent spiritual purity and moral perfection. The novel's title is a reference to a popular African American spiritual song, and the novel's characters are brought closer to God through songs and music. Music is a major part of church and tarry services at the Temple of the Fire Baptized, and even when Florence has forgotten how to pray, she can still remember the words to her mother, Rachel's, favorite gospel song, "Standing in the Need of Prayer." The music of the Temple of the Fire Baptized has "been with John, so it seemed, since he had first drawn breath," and it "caused him to believe in the presence of the Lord." But John only reluctantly sings in church and refuses to clap or dance; he believes himself a sinner and thus doesn't think he has the "right to sing or rejoice," further suggesting that religious songs represent spiritual and moral purity in the novel.

As gospel music and hymns are symbolic of God and religion, jazz music and rhythm and blues are symbolic of sin and immorality. The "sinners" who frequent the whiskey houses and gin joints near John's Harlem church listen to the blues, and blues music is frequently associated with "harlots" and

whorehouses in the novel. Frank, Florence's ex-husband, who was, according to Florence, "determined to live and die a common [n_____]," "drank too much" and "sang the blues"—from Florence's perspective, Frank's penchant for the blues was reflective of his immorality.

However, despite what his characters may think, Baldwin forces his readers to reevaluate "sinners" in relation to popular stereotypes of immorality, like listening to the blues or jazz, and suggests that this music isn't sinful in and of itself. Baldwin frequently references the spiritual song, "I Looked Down the Line (And I Wondered)," by Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Sister Tharpe's unique blend of gospel and the blues was wildly popular in the 1930s and '40s, and she was one of the very first cross-over acts, successfully performing her spiritual songs at jazz clubs and dance halls across America. Through references to the music of Sister Tharpe and others, Baldwin suggests that one can be both moral and sing the blues.

THE THRESHING-FLOOR

The threshing-floor is the surface before the altar in John's Harlem church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized, and it symbolizes God's judgement in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In biblical times, harvesting wheat was a laborious process—without machinery, grain had to be separated from the chaff by hand. This typically involved a large flat surface, usually high above the fields so the wind could hit it, where the wheat could be laid out and repeatedly trampled by oxen. The Old Testament uses the image of a threshing-floor to tell stories of God's judgement. In the Book of Hosea, for example, Hosea prophesized that God would throw the Israelites to the wind, much like chaff blowing from the threshing-floor, because they worshipped false idols, and Baldwin imbues it with similar significance.

Members of John's church go to the threshing-floor to feel the spirit of God and to be saved and redeemed for their sins. Elisha, one of the temple's "saints" and preachers, falls to his knees on the threshing-floor and begins "to speak in a tongue of fire, under the power of the Holy Ghost." Elizabeth goes to the threshing-floor to confess her sins and be saved, but since she is not truly sorry for loving Richard and giving birth to his son, John, out of wedlock, she doubts her redemption. John, too, is moved to the threshing-floor under a mysterious power, and after being thrust into a "darkness" that "has no beginning, and no end," John is lifted by God and will be rewarded with "eternal life" in Heaven. Having gone to the threshing-floor to be judged by God, John is found to be righteous.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Go Tell It On a Mountain* published in 2013.

Part 1: The Seventh Day Quotes

I looked down the line,
And I wondered.

Related Characters: John

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This quote begins *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and it is significant because it establishes the importance of music within the novel. Baldwin frequently references gospel music and hymns to symbolize religious devotion, redemption, and morality, and this quote is taken from a gospel song written by singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe in 1939. Baldwin references this song several times throughout the novel, both directly and indirectly, and this is the first time it appears. Sister Tharpe's song lyrics have much meaning in the context of the novel. The "line" that she refers to are other people of faith—her congregation or any religious community—and what she "wondered" is revealed in the next line (which Baldwin omits yet still implies). She "looked down the line" to "see how far" she "was from God," and this is exactly what Baldwin does in his novel.

John struggles with his faith and questions if he is a good person in the eyes of God and religion. For comparison, he "looks down the line" at his family and congregation and considers their relationships to God. John finds that his father, Gabriel, who is a preacher and should be closest to God, is actually a sinner; and those who are considered wicked, like Gabriel's first wife, Deborah, who is viewed as a "harlot," are perhaps nearest to God. Baldwin's "look down the line" forces readers to reconsider who, and what kind of behavior, is thought to be close to God and therefore moral.

Every Sunday morning, then, since John could remember, they had taken to the streets, the Grimes family on their way to church. Sinners along the avenue watched them—men still wearing their Saturday-night clothes, wrinkled and dusty now, muddy-eyed and muddy-faced; and women with harsh voices and tight, bright dresses, cigarettes between their fingers or held tightly in the corners of their mouths. They talked, and laughed, and fought together, and the women fought like the men. John and Roy, passing these men and women, looked at one another briefly, John embarrassed and Roy amused. Roy would be like them when he grew up, if the Lord did not change his heart. These men and women they passed on Sunday mornings had spent the night in bars, or in cat houses, or on the streets, or on rooftops, or under the stairs. They had been drinking. They had gone from cursing to laughter, to anger, to lust. Once he and Roy had watched a man and woman in the basement of a condemned house. They did it standing up. The woman had wanted fifty cents, and the man had flashed a razor.

Related Characters: Roy, John

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Here, John and his family are on their way to church. This passage is important because it creates a dichotomy between those of faith and "sinners." Those who partake in sin, like drinking in whiskey-houses on Saturday night, are viewed as immoral in the novel. Whereas those who abstain from vices, such as gambling and loud raucous music, are moral and righteous. Baldwin implies that these sinning men, still in their "wrinkled and dusty" clothes from the night before, have been out all night and up to no good. The women, with their "bright dresses" and "cigarettes" are clear "sinners" compared to John and Roy's mother, dressed entirely in white (a color evoking innocence and moral purity) for church. John and Roy serve as foils here—John is inherently good and therefore "embarrassed" by sin, while Roy, who is more resistant to God and religion, is "amused."

This quote also reflects the sexism and misogyny that pervades much of the novel. The women fight "like men," which implies that women should be restrained and demure, like John's mother. The fact that the women in the street are "like men" is offered as further proof of their sin. Baldwin is openly critical of this assumption, and he frequently draws attention to the misogyny that saturates the world of the novel. This quote also establishes the connection between sex and sin, as well as the connection between sex and violence. John and Roy watch the "sinners" having sex, the very height of sin in the novel, and the woman is portrayed as a prostitute when she expects money for her services. This reflects the widespread contempt for women in America's sexist society, which is further reflected in the violence of the man's knife. The man's response to the woman suggests that he considers sex to be owed to him, not something that he must pay for in one way or another.

It seemed that he could not breathe, that his body could not contain this passion, that he would be, before their eyes, dispersed into the waiting air. His hands, rigid to the very fingertips, moved outward and back against his hips, his sightless eyes looked upward, and he began to dance. Then his hands closed into fists, and his head snapped downward, his sweat loosening the grease that slicked down his hair; and the rhythm of all the others quickened to match Elisha's rhythm; his thighs moved terribly against the cloth of his suit, his heels beat on the floor, and his fists moved beside his body as though he were beating his own drum. And so, for a while, in the center of the dancers, head down, fists beating, on, on, unbearably, until it seemed the walls of the church would fall for very sound; and then, in a moment, with a cry, head up, arms high in the air, sweat pouring from his forehead, and all his body dancing as though it would never stop. Sometimes he did not stop until he fell—until he dropped like some animal felled by a hammer—moaning, on his face.

Related Characters: Elisha, John

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Baldwin is explaining the services at John's Harlem church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized, and it also reflects the importance of music in the novel and the connection between music and faith and religion. Faith and love for God is often expressed through music in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and here Elisha's singing and dancing seems a spiritual experience in and of itself. The Elisha, along with the entire congregation, is brought closer to God by way of music. The experience can hardly be "contained," and it seems as if they will bring down the church with the force of their celebration. John's church does not quietly worship the Lord—they worship loudly, without restraint, through music and dance.

This quote also reflects John's latent homosexuality and his love for Elisha. Here, Baldwin explains Elisha's singing and

dancing in overtly sexual terms, and the passage itself is reminiscent of an orgasm. Elisha "can't breathe," and his body can't "contain his passion." His hands are "rigid," and they guide his hips back and forth as he dances. His "rhythm" is "quickened," and the congregation follows, until Elisha is spent and falls, breathless and "pouring" sweat, to the ground. John is less taken by the spiritual movement of the church service and is more concerned with Elisha's body, and this is reflected, albeit subtly, throughout much of the novel.

❝ Through a storm of tears that did not reach his eyes, he stared at the yellow room; and the room shifted, the light of the sun darkened, and his mother's face changed. Her face became the face that he gave her in his dreams, the face that had been hers in a photograph he had seen once, long ago, a photograph taken before he was born. This face was young and proud, uplifted, with a smile that made the wide mouth beautiful and glowed in the enormous eyes. It was the face of a girl who knew that no evil could undo her, and who could laugh, surely, as his mother did not laugh now. Between the two faces there stretched a darkness and a mystery that John feared, and that sometimes caused him to hate her.

Related Characters: Gabriel, Elizabeth, John

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Baldwin introduces Elizabeth, and it describes how John feels about the "perpetual scowl" upon her face. This passage is important because, for just a moment, John sees his mother as she was before the scowl set in, and it gives insight into how, and why, she came to be so unhappy. Baldwin's language reflects how John sees her—bathed in soft yellow light in the middle of a dirty room—and this contrast amplifies the obvious hardships of her life. Elizabeth was once "young and proud," before John was born, which is to say something in John's birth has prompted her troubles.

While John doesn't know that his mother gave birth to him out of wedlock, Elizabeth believes that her choices constitute a mortal sin that both she and John will be expected to atone for, but Baldwin implies otherwise. Baldwin writes that Elizabeth thought "no evil could undo her" when she was young, but this, of course, wasn't true, and as the novel shows, she is terribly undone by the evil of Gabriel. In this way, Baldwin argues that Gabriel is the evil one, not Elizabeth, and that neither she nor John are tainted or responsible for any perceived sin. Still, Elizabeth's sexist society assumes she is guilty because she did not prescribe to their narrow code of conduct and had sex out of wedlock, and she pays for these unfair assumptions, presumably, for the rest of her life. Elizabeth's poor treatment prompts her scowl, which in turn causes her son to hate her.

❝ To sweep the front room meant, principally, to sweep the heavy red and green and purple Oriental-style carpet that had once been that room's glory, but was now so faded that it was all one swimming color, and so frayed in places that it tangled with the broom. John hated sweeping this carpet, for dust rose, clogging his nose and sticking to his sweaty skin, and he felt that should he sweep it forever, the clouds of dust would not diminish, the rug would not be clean. It became in his imagination his impossible, lifelong task, his hard trial, like that of a man he had read about somewhere, whose curse it was to push a boulder up a steep hill, only to have the giant who guarded the hill roll the boulder down again—and so on, forever, throughout eternity; he was still out there, that hapless man, somewhere at the other end of the earth, pushing his boulder up the hill.

Related Characters: John

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Baldwin describes John's assigned chore of sweeping the living room rug, which serves as a metaphor for John's racist society. Society has marginalized John and his family, who are black, and sidelined them to only the dirtiest and most rundown parts of town. The carpet, like the kitchen Baldwin describes earlier, is so dirty that it can never be clean, and it isn't from lack of trying. The carpet was originally "red and green and purple"—jewel-toned colors often associated with royalty—which implies African Americans were once proud and wealthy people, before they were enslaved and exploited by white people. Now, black people are like the rug—"faded" and "frayed in places"—which is to say abused and tired.

As John sweeps the rug, Baldwin references the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who was punished by Zeus essentially because he was too smart and was thus sentenced to pushing the boulder up the mountain. This myth generally serves as a metaphor for futility; no matter how many times Sisyphus pushes the boulder up the mountain, it will always

be pushed back down the next day, and Baldwin draws a parallel between this myth and racism in America. No matter how much John sweeps, he will always be in filth because society forces him to live in it. In this way, Baldwin suggests that overcoming racism in American society is a futile task, an opinion which is further supported in Richard's suicide.

❝ His father said that all white people were wicked, and that God was going to bring them low. He said that white people were never to be trusted, and that they told nothing but lies, and that not one of them had ever loved a [n____]. He, John, was a [n____], and he would find out, as soon as he got a little older, how evil white people could be. John had read about the things white people did to colored people; how, in the South, where his parents came from, white people cheated them of their wages, and burned them, and shot them—and did worse things, said his father, which the tongue could not endure to utter. He had read about colored men being burned in the electric chair for things they had not done; how in riots they were beaten with clubs; how they were tortured in prisons; how they were the last to be hired and the first to be fired.

Related Characters: Gabriel, John

Page Number: 34-35

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs as John walks down Fifth Avenue among all the white people, underscores the historical trauma associated with racism and slavery. Baldwin ultimately highlights how American slavery has created a painful legacy that continues to afflict black Americans long after the end of slavery, and John's reaction to the white people on Fifth Avenue is evidence of this. Baldwin doesn't downplay John's experiences with racism (he is not permitted in certain buildings and he is frequently ignored), but his own experiences are nothing like Gabriel's during the Reconstruction Era or Rachel's in the Antebellum South. However, John still experiences these tragedies through his father's trauma.

In Gabriel's experience, white people have frequently meant him harm. He witnessed the aftermath of Deborah's rape at the hands of a group of brutal white men, and he lived through the possibility that the white men would burn down their entire town afterward. He has lived through lynchings and race riots, *and* he has been instilled with *his* mother's trauma as well, which is a direct result of the slavery she was born into. Thus, John is brought up with the scars of slavery and racism through his father, who was brought up with the scars of his mother, and so on. American slavery, argues Baldwin, has created a pernicious cycle of oppression and fear, which isn't likely to be broken anytime soon.

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints: Florence's Prayer Quotes

❝ She had always seemed to Florence the oldest woman in the world, for she often spoke of Florence and Gabriel as the children of her old age, and she had been born, innumerable years ago, during slavery, on a plantation in another state. On this plantation she had grown up as one of the field workers, for she was very tall and strong; and by and by she had married and raised children, all of whom had been taken from her, one by sickness and two by auction; and one, whom she had not been allowed to call her own, had been raised in the master's house.

Related Characters: Gabriel, Rachel, Florence

Page Number: 74-75

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which occurs as Florence is reminiscing about her mother, underscores the historical trauma caused by American slavery. This passage speaks to the hardships of Rachel's life as a slave; hardships that were caused entirely by white people, which have had a lasting effect on society. Slavery was abolished by the time Gabriel and Florence were born, but this does not mean that they are not directly affected by this stain on American history.

Rachel was well past thirty years old by the time she was freed (although she isn't exactly sure since she doesn't *really* know how old she is), which means that by the time she was thirty, she had already had four children and two husbands. Rachel's children were slaves as well, which meant more cheap labor or money at the auction block. Rachel was stripped of her rights as a woman and a mother and denied her own children. Thus, Gabriel and Florence have been denied their siblings as well, and, Baldwin contends, this creates trauma that does not soon fade.

> Gabriel was the apple of his mother's eye. […] With the birth of Gabriel, which occurred when [Florence] was five, her future was swallowed up. There was only one future in that house, and it was Gabriel's—to which, since Gabriel was a manchild, all else must be sacrificed. Her mother did not, indeed, think of it as sacrifice, but as logic: Florence was a girl, and would by and by be married, and have children of her own, and all the duties of a woman; and this being so, her life in the cabin was the best possible preparation for her future life. But Gabriel was a man; he would go out one day into the world to do a man's work, and he needed, therefore, meat, when there was any in the house, and clothes, whenever clothes could be bought, and the strong indulgence of his womenfolk, so that he would know how to be with women when he had a wife.

Related Characters: Gabriel, Rachel, Florence

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin describes Florence's childhood in the South, lending insight into why Florence is so resentful of men. Rachel obviously gave Gabriel preferential treatment—treatment Florence herself was used to getting before Gabriel was born. She is pushed aside when he is born, and then she is basically told that he is more important because he is a boy. Rachel sees this as "logic," which reflects the sexist nature of their patriarchal society. As society holds men up as superior, so does she, and because of this, Florence is made to suffer.

This also forces Florence into a role that she definitely does not want. She is denied opportunity and thereby only technically qualified to run a home, which is right where society wants her. She feels trapped, and she resents all men, especially Gabriel, because of it. Baldwin's reference to "the strong indulgence of womenfolk" is a bit ironic, or perhaps sarcastic on Baldwin's part. Rachel's "indulgence" doesn't appear to have taught Gabriel a thing about "how to be with a woman." He treats every woman he comes into contact with badly, including his mother, Florence, Deborah, Esther, and Elizabeth. In this way, Baldwin implies that Rachel's "indulgences" were in vain, and Florence was made to sacrifice for naught.

> When men looked at Deborah they saw no further than her unlovely and violated body. In their eyes lived perpetually a lewd, uneasy wonder concerning the night she had been taken in the fields. That night had robbed her of the right to be considered a woman. No man would approach her in honor because she was a living reproach, to herself and to all black women and to all black men. […] Since she could not be considered a woman, she could only be looked on as a harlot, a source of delight more bestial and mysteries more shaking than any a proper woman could provide. Lust stirred in the eyes of men when they looked at Deborah, lust that could not be endured because it was so impersonal, limiting communion to the area of her shame. And Florence, who was beautiful but did not look with favor on any of the black men who lusted after her, […] reinforced in Deborah the terrible belief against which no evidence had ever presented itself: that all men were like this, their thoughts rose no higher, and they lived only to gratify on the bodies of women their brutal and humiliating needs.

Related Characters: Florence, Deborah

Page Number: 79-80

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin describes the aftermath of Deborah's rape, which underscores the misogyny present in both American society and Christianity and how Deborah is made to suffer because of it. Obviously, since Deborah was raped, she had no control over her attack and is the victim. Yet Deborah is the one who pays for her rape, not her rapists. This is reflected in Deborah's "unlovely and violated body." The men find her unattractive because they consider her sexually tainted; however, they secretly look at her as a sexual object that exists, as Deborah says, only to "gratify" their "brutal and humiliating needs."

Deborah also suffers because she is made to bear the moral stain of her attack. Deborah's rape speaks to the immorality of her rapists, not to Deborah's, but since her attack involves sex, Deborah is made to be a sinner. She can no longer be considered a woman, who society says should be chaste and pure, so she is a whore, or something worse, something "bestial" like an animal. This not only strips Deborah of her autonomy and womanhood, it strips her of her humanity as well. Deborah is perhaps the most righteous and moral person in the entire book, yet she is made out to be a monster by her sexist society and religion, which Baldwin argues is doubly tragic. Instead of being a source of comfort in the face of her attack, Deborah's religion makes her attack much, much worse. She has to endure both the physical agony of the attack and the spiritual and psychological agony induced by her religious beliefs.

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints: Gabriel's Prayer Quotes

❝ For he desired in his soul, with fear and trembling, all the glories that his mother prayed he should find. Yes, he wanted power—he wanted to know himself to be the Lord's anointed, His well-beloved, and worthy, nearly, of that snow-white dove which had been sent down from Heaven to testify that Jesus was the Son of God. He wanted to be master, to speak with that authority which could only come from God.

Related Characters: Rachel, Gabriel

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Gabriel reminisces about his youth and thinks back to before he was saved. This passage reflects Gabriel's desire to come to the Lord and be saved, but it also underscores the racist nature of Reconstruction Era society. Christianity promises Gabriel eternal life if he gives himself to the Lord, but this means he will must follow a confined and holy path. Thus, he "trembles with fear"; he wants to be saved, but it is a difficult way, and he doesn't know if he has the strength. However, Gabriel's racist society is full of hardship, and Christianity offers him salvation in the afterlife.

Baldwin's langue reflects these hardships. Gabriel wants "power," which is exactly what has been stripped of him by white America. White America assumes that Gabriel isn't "worthy," and he for once, even if only in death, wants to feel his worth. He talks of a "snow-white dove," and claims he wants to be "master" and speak with "authority." Indeed, Baldwin's words connote slavery and racism, and he further suggests that the power assumed by white America is altogether false and undeserved. Gabriel feels that this amount of power can "only come from God," and, assuming that God did not grant them this power, Baldwin seems to imply that all people are in fact created equally.

❝ Again, there was her legend, her history, which would have been enough, even had she not been so wholly unattractive, to put her forever beyond the gates of any honorable man's desire. This, indeed, in her silent, stolid fashion, she seemed to know: where, it might be, other women held as their very charm and secret the joy that they could give and share, she contained only the shame that she had borne—shame, unless a miracle of human love delivered her, was all she had to give. And she moved, therefore, through their small community like a woman mysteriously visited by God, like a terrible example of humility, or like a holy fool. […]There were people in the church, and even men carrying the gospel, who mocked Deborah behind her back; but their mockery was uneasy; they could never be certain but that they might be holding up to scorn the greatest saint among them, the Lord's peculiar treasure and most holy vessel.

Related Characters: Deborah, Gabriel

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Gabriel thinks back on his decision to marry Deborah, and it is important because it reflects both Gabriel's misogyny and that of broader society; however, it also implies that sex and sin are not synonymous as Christianity often assumes. Deborah's "history," that is her rape, makes her "unattractive" to Gabriel, plus, Gabriel claims, Deborah is physically "unattractive" as well. He implies that only beautiful women are good enough and holds Deborah to impossible standards. She can do nothing about the fact that she was raped, nor can she change the way she looks.

Baldwin implies that sex can be empowering to some women, but for Deborah, her rape has replaced this power with "shame." She is made to feel dirty and like a sinner because she was violated, but Baldwin implies that she is "the greatest saint among them." Deborah's community mocks and shames her as a sinner and a whore, but even they seem to know that Deborah is the most pious. Deborah is an exceedingly good person despite her attack. The world has given her very little reason to be kind and accepting, but she is good to everyone. Baldwin argues the Deborah's "legend" does not make her sinful or "unattractive," and that she is instead God's "most holy vessel."

> The living son had cursed him—*bastard*—and his heart was far from God; it could not be that the curse he had heard tonight falling from Roy's lips was but the curse repeated, so far, so long resounding, that the mother of his first son had uttered as she thrust the infant from her—herself immediately departing, this curse yet on her lips, into eternity. Her curse had devoured the first Royal; he had been begotten in sin, and he had perished in sin; it was God's punishment, and it was just. But Roy had been begotten in the marriage bed, the bed that Paul described as holy, and it was to him the Kingdom had been promised. It could not be that the living son was cursed for the sins of his father; for God, after much groaning, after many years, had given him a sign to make him know he was forgiven. And yet, it came to him that this living son, this headlong, living Royal, might be cursed for the sin of his mother, whose sin had never been truly repented; for that the living proof of her sin, he who knelt tonight, a very interloper among the saints, stood between her soul and God.

Related Characters: Elizabeth, John, Esther, Royal, Roy, Gabriel

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Gabriel is reflecting on his son, Roy's, behavior and Roy's resistance to accepting the Lord in his life. Gabriel believes that Roy has been cursed, as he believes all black people have, but Roy is cursed for different reasons as well, and these reasons reflect Gabriel's deep misogyny. Roy curses Gabriel as a "bastard" because Gabriel slaps Elizabeth, but Gabriel blames Roy's hatred for him on Esther. Esther told Gabriel he would pay for his ill treatment of her, and he assumes that his trouble with his son is his penance. In this way, Gabriel doesn't have to take responsibility for his own actions but instead places all responsibility on Esther.

Gabriel, too, blames Royal's death on Esther. As Royal was born in "sin," that is out of wedlock, and this, too, is Esther's fault alone (from Gabriel's perspective), Gabriel considers Royal's death "God's punishment" and "just," but Baldwin implies this isn't true. Florence blames Gabriel for Royal and Esther's death, and Deborah implies she does as well, which means both Royal and Esther paid for Gabriel's sins, not their own. Gabriel even goes so far as to say that Roy is cursed because Elizabeth gave birth to John out of wedlock. This way, Gabriel further avoids responsibility by again making everything a woman's fault. Roy possibly gets into trouble as a way to rebel against his abusive father and his oppressive religion, but he squarely blames Roy's behavior on Elizabeth, which reflects his deep hatred and disrespect for women in general.

> "Yes," he answered, rising, and turning away, "Satan tempted me and I fell. I ain't the first man been made to fall on account of a wicked woman."

"You be careful," said Esther, "how you talk to me. I ain't the first girl's been ruined by a holy man, neither."

"Ruined?" he cried. "You? How you going to be ruined? When you been walking through this town just like a harlot, and a-kicking up your heels all over the pasture? How you going to stand there and tell me you been *ruined*? If it hadn't been me, it sure would have been somebody else."

Related Characters: Esther, Gabriel (speaker), Royal

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

This interaction occurs between Gabriel and Esther when she tells him that she is pregnant with Royal, Gabriel's son. This passage showcases Gabriel's deep misogyny and reveals the despicable nature of his character. Gabriel presents himself as a deeply pious man and stands in judgement over everyone else, but his treatment of Esther proves that he is just as sinful as anyone. Furthermore, he takes no responsibility for his actions. "Satan tempted" him, and therefore he suggests that it is understandable, if not acceptable, that he fell. However, Gabriel implies that Esther has no excuse and is simply wicked.

Esther's response also implies that piousness is often a disguise to coverup sinfulness in men, which further paints Christianity is an unfavorable light. "Holy men" should be kind and good, but Esther says otherwise. Gabriel's claim that he is the "ruined" one reflects his cruelty and hatred toward women. Esther is the one that must endure pregnancy, childbirth, and the scorn of her sexist society, but Gabriel insists that he suffers more. He even claims that had he not been the one to get Esther pregnant, it would have been another man. Gabriel calls her a "harlot" and implies she is a whore, and this is his final insult before he leaves her forever. Gabriel very clearly hates women and is a completely awful human being, and no amount of prayer or religion can change this.

> *What I think is, I made a mistake, that's true, and I'm paying for it now. But don't you think you ain't going to pay for it—I don't know when and I don't know how, but I know you going to be brought low one of these fine days. 1 ain't holy like you are, but 1 know right from wrong.*
>
> *I'm going to have my baby and I'm going to bring him up to be a man. And 1 ain't going to read to him out of no Bibles and I ain't going to take him to hear no preaching. If he don't drink nothing but moonshine all his natural days he be a better man than his Daddy.*

Related Characters: Esther (speaker), Royal, Gabriel

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

This passage constitutes a letter sent from Esther to Gabriel after she goes to Chicago to give birth to Royal, underscoring Baldwin's argument that holy and religious does not always mean moral. Gabriel repeatedly implies that Esther is a no-good sinner because she doesn't go to church and talks to too many men. Yet there is no evidence that Esther is a bad person. Gabriel, on the other hand, treats people terribly and cheats on his wife, yet he considers himself saved because he embraces the Lord. While Gabriel clearly respects God, he does not respect God's people, and Baldwin implies this makes him wholly immoral.

It is important to note that Esther takes responsibility for her own role in causing her situation, which is something Gabriel refuses to do for the entire course of the novel, which spans over thirty years after Royal's birth. Florence manages, somewhat, to hold Gabriel accountable with Deborah's letter, but even this is only when she threatens his holy reputation. Esther claims she doesn't need religion to "know right from wrong," and this seems to be one of Baldwin's central arguments. Gabriel's religion assumes that Esther is a bad person because she gave birth out of wedlock, but she is a much better person than Gabriel, a preacher and "God's anointed one."

> "I asked my God to forgive me," he said. "But I didn't want no harlot's son."

"Esther weren't no harlot," she said quietly.

"She weren't my wife. I couldn't make her my wife. I already had *you*"—and he said the last words with venom "Esther's mind weren't on the Lord—she'd of dragged me right on down to Hell with her."

"She mighty near has," said Deborah.

Related Characters: Deborah, Gabriel (speaker), Royal, Esther

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

This interaction takes place between Deborah and Gabriel after she confronts him about fathering Esther's baby, and it is important because it further establishes Gabriel as a sinner and reveals his religious hypocrisy. Gabriel knows he has sinned in his despicable treatment of Esther and Royal, but he thinks he is off the hook simply because he asked God for forgiveness. Maybe Gabriel could have been let off the hook had he apologized to Esther, or to Royal, or to Deborah, but he cares very little about anyone other than himself.

Deborah's claim that Esther wasn't a "harlot" proves that Gabriel has misjudged her; however, even if Esther had been a harlot, it still would not excuse Gabriel's behavior. Gabriel even goes as far as to imply that Deborah shares some responsibility in Gabriel's treatment of Esther and Royal and their subsequent deaths. After all, Gabriel couldn't marry Esther and take care of Royal because Deborah was already his wife. Gabriel very clearly hates Deborah, and he believes that Esther was a no-good sinner. He thought that by turning Esther away he could save his soul, but, as Deborah points out, it is instead a primary cause of his damnation.

Part 2: The Prayers of the Saints: Elizabeth's Prayer Quotes

> No, she did not accuse him; but she accused her aunt, and this from the moment she understood that her aunt had loved her mother, but did not love him. This could only mean that her aunt could not love her, either, and nothing in her life with her aunt ever proved Elizabeth wrong. It was true that her aunt was always talking of how much she loved her sister's daughter, and what great sacrifices she had made on her account, and what great care she took to see to it that Elizabeth should grow up a good, Christian girl. But Elizabeth was not for a moment fooled, and did not, for as long as she lived with her, fail to despise her aunt. She sensed that what her aunt spoke of as love was something else—a bribe, a threat, an indecent will to power. She knew that the kind of imprisonment that love might impose was also, mysteriously, a freedom for the soul and spirit, was water in the dry place, and had nothing to do with the prisons, churches, laws, rewards, and punishments, that so positively cluttered the landscape of her aunt's mind.

Related Characters: Elizabeth's Father, Elizabeth's Aunt, Elizabeth

Page Number: 182-183

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Baldwin introduces Elizabeth's aunt, and it implies that those who are religious are not always moral. Elizabeth hates her aunt in large part because she forces Elizabeth to move away from her loving father, but also because she treats Elizabeth with undue contempt. Elizabeth's aunt loved the girl's mother, but she hated Elizabeth's father, and since Elizabeth is so much like her father, Elizabeth assumes, and rightly so, that her aunt hates her as well.

Elizabeth's aunt doesn't take Elizabeth in because she cares and truly wants to see Elizabeth be properly cared for. She simply wants to appear to care, so she can look better to others. She is not a good and righteous woman, such as Deborah, who truly cares about others. Her motivation is selfish and couldn't be further from God, and this motivation is perhaps the "something else" Elizabeth refers to. Like Gabriel, Elizabeth's aunt is a hateful sinner masquerading as a saint, and she serves to further disrupt common stereotypes of sinners and saints. Baldwin forces readers to reevaluate who and what they consider holy or sinful, and Elizabeth's aunt is a prime example of this.

❝ Richard said that they would marry as soon as he had saved some money. But since he was going to school at night and made very little money, their marriage, which she had thought of as taking place almost as soon as she arrived, was planned for a future that grew ever more remote. And this presented her with a problem that she had refused, at home in Maryland, to think about, but from which, now, she could not escape: the problem of their life together. [...] She had kept, precariously enough, what her aunt referred to as her pearl without price while she had been with Richard down home. This, which she had taken as witness to her own feminine moral strength, had been due to nothing more, it now developed, than her great fear of her aunt, and the lack, in that small town, of opportunity. Here, in this great city where no one cared, where people might live in the same building for years and never speak to one another, she found herself, when Richard took her in his arms, on the edge of a steep place: and down she rushed, on the descent uncaring, into the dreadful sea.

Related Characters: Elizabeth's Aunt, Richard, Elizabeth

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 190-191

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Elizabeth loses her virginity to Richard, and it underscores the sexist nature of America's patriarchal society as well as the oppressive nature of Christianity. Both Elizabeth's religion and society dictate that she must wait until marriage to have sex or else be shunned and scorned. The importance of remaining pure is reflected in Elizabeth's aunt's reference to Elizabeth's "pearl without price." If Elizabeth allows herself to be sexually tainted, she will become undesirable, much like Deborah, although the same can't be said for Richard.

Elizabeth doesn't remain a virgin because she thinks to have sex is a sin—she simply doesn't have the "opportunity" under her aunt's watchful eye. Away in New York this isn't a problem, and she quickly gives in. Baldwin again employs the image of a mountain to symbolize the sacrifices needed to remain holy. Elizabeth fails and "rushes" down "the edge of a steep place" into a "dreadful sea" of sin. Baldwin, however, ultimately implies this isn't such a sin, or at least that it shouldn't be. Elizabeth and Richard plan to be man and wife, but even marriage implies privilege that they don't necessarily have, and it is delayed for financial reasons. What if they never have enough money, Baldwin seems to ask, should they never have sex? Baldwin implies this is a needless sacrifice—Elizabeth and Richard are in love, and there is nothing sinful about their relationship.

❝ There was not, after all, a great difference between the world of the North and that of the South which she had fled; there was only this difference: the North promised more. And this similarity: what it promised it did not give, and what it gave, at length and grudgingly with one hand, it took back with the other. Now she understood in this nervous, hollow, ringing city, that nervousness of Richard's which had so attracted her—a tension so total, and so without the hope, or possibility of release, or resolution, that she felt it in his muscles, and heard it in his breathing, even as on her breast he fell asleep.

Related Characters: Richard, Elizabeth

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Elizabeth moves North with

Richard and they discover that the North is just as racist as the South. With this, the book again suggests the futility in trying to overcome or resist racism in America. Elizabeth and Richard move North to escape the hatred and racism of the South, but they only find more of the same. The North "promises" black Americans better jobs and education and some relief from the indignity of Jim Crow, but it does not deliver, and it is this type of repeated abuse and marginalization that leads to Richard's "nervousness" and ends in his suicide.

This harkens back to the rug in John's home in Harlem. No matter how much he sweeps it, it will always be dirty. Similarly, it doesn't matter how hard Richard and Elizabeth work or how much they better themselves or look for opportunity, they will always be looked down on by white America. Like Richard's "nervousness," there is no "hope, or possibility of release, or resolution" to racism, and while this message isn't particularly optimistic, Baldwin proves that it is nonetheless true. Richard dies trying to be accepted by white America and others are negatively affected as well.

❝ "I just decided me one day that I was going to get to know everything them white bastards knew, and I was going to get to know it better than them, so could no white son-of-a-bitch *nowhere* never talk *me* down, and never make me feel like I was dirt, when I could read him the alphabet, back, front, and sideways. Shit—he weren't going to beat my ass, then. And if he tried to kill me, I'd take him with me, I swear to my mother I would." Then he looked at her again, and smiled and kissed her, and he said: "That's how I got to know so much, baby."

Related Characters: Richard (speaker), Elizabeth

Page Number: 196-197

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs when Elizabeth asks Richard how he got to be so smart, underscores the racism present in American society and the lengths Richard must go to in order to be considered equal. America's racist society assumes that Richard can't be both black and smart, but he is exceedingly intelligent, and he is always reading a book. Richard spends time in museums studying and appreciating art, and he is trying to save money so he can go to school. Richard thinks that if he is smart enough, then white people will have to respect him, but, tragically, this is not the case.

Richard's language, punctuated with impassioned curse words, reflects his anger and resentment. He comments on how white people "talk down" to him and make him "feel like dirt." Although he attempts to regain some of this lost social power through education, it makes little difference when he comes up against a racist police department. Notably, Richard's anger and resentment fades as soon as he turns his attention to Elizabeth. When he tells her, "That's how I got to know so much, baby," there isn't a hint of the hate and violence that saturates his earlier words. Richard is continually oppressed and mistreated by white people, and, Baldwin contends, his anger is wholly and completely justified.

Part 3: The Threshing-Floor Quotes

❝ Then the ironic voice, terrified, it seemed, of no depth, no darkness, demanded of John, scornfully, if he believed that he was cursed. All [n____s] had been cursed, the ironic voice reminded him, all [n____s] had come from this most undutiful of Noah's sons. How could John be cursed for having seen in a bathtub what another man—if that other man had ever lived—had seen ten thousand years ago, lying in an open tent? Could a curse come down so many ages? Did it live in time, or in the moment? But John found no answer for this voice, for he was in the moment, and out of time. [...] Then his father stood just above him, looking down. Then John knew that a curse was renewed from moment to moment, from father to son. Time was indifferent, like snow and ice; but the heart, crazed wanderer in the driving waste, carried the curse forever.

Related Characters: Gabriel, John

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 232-233

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as John is being judged by God on the threshing-floor. Here, John is struggling with what he believes to be his curse, which is both his sexuality and his race. Baldwin refers to the biblical curse of Ham, which says Ham and all his descendants will be cursed because Ham, Noah's son, looked at his father's naked body. John has looked at Gabriel's as well, and he questions if he is cursed. Furthermore, the story of Ham and his sons is often cited to justify slavery and racism, which Baldwin implies to be yet another downfall of Christianity.

Here, John questions not only the curse but the existence of Noah and Ham, which essentially questions God's existence as well. The voice asks John if he believes he has been cursed, and while John has certainly seen his fair share of heartache, it doesn't appear that he believes he has been cursed, at least not by God. The curse of slavery and racism

has been "renewed from moment to moment, from father to son," since the time of Noah and Ham, and, Baldwin implies, it will likely keep going. It is not, however, handed down by God, he implies, and the Bible is no excuse for the violent history of slavery in America. Although Baldwin doesn't deny throughout his book that Christianity can be a source of joy, comfort, and purpose for its adherents, he also suggests that Christianity can be twisted in a way that excuses deplorable behavior and further perpetuates racism and oppression.

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.

PART 1: THE SEVENTH DAY

For as long as John can remember, it has always been assumed that he will become a preacher like his father, Gabriel. John himself accepts this as a given and has never thought much about it—until the day of his fourteenth birthday—but it is "already too late."

John's claim that it is "already too late" is ambiguous. It is unclear whether it is "too late" for John to be anything other than a preacher; or, if it is "too late" for John to become a preacher since he is already a "sinner." Either way, John has little choice in what he becomes, which begins to introduce the idea that religion can be an oppressive force in its adherents' lives.

John's first memories, which are his "only memories," are of going to church on Sunday mornings with his family. His father, Gabriel, would lead them in prayer, and his mother, Elizabeth, "looked almost young" in her best dresses and "straightened hair." John's younger brother, Roy, was always on his best behavior, and Sarah, John's sister, would put a ribbon in her hair and be "fondled by her father." Ruth, the baby, was dressed in her best as well.

John's early memories of church are evidence of the importance of God and religion in his life. His memories also outline the sexist nature of their patriarchal home. Gabriel, the head of the family, "leads" them, and he misuses this power when he sexually abuses Sarah. Elizabeth's "straightened hair"—made to more closely resemble a white woman's hair—reflects her internalized racism, which will become more apparent as the novel unfolds.

John's family's church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized, is just a few blocks from their Harlem home, near the local hospital. Elizabeth has given birth to most of her children at the hospital, and each time she goes there, John thinks, his mother comes "back with a stranger." She will "soon be going away again," and even though John cannot yet appreciate any "swelling" in his mother, he knows this to be true.

Here, it is revealed that Elizabeth is pregnant, and while it is never mentioned again throughout the novel, this is important because it speaks to the level of Gabriel's cruelty and immorality. He later slaps Elizabeth with "all his might," and while this is bad enough on its own, Gabriel's abuse of his wife is made even more despicable considering her pregnancy.

Each Sunday when John and his family walk to church, they pass "sinners" along the way. Men, "wrinkled and dusty," still dressed in Saturday's clothes, and women with "tight, bright dresses" and cigarettes between their lips. The sinners "laugh" and "fight," and "the women fight like the men." John always feels ashamed as they pass, but Roy is always "amused." Roy will likely grow up to be one of these men "if the Lord does not change his heart."

John's holy family and the "sinners" establish the dichotomy of sin and morality. As the "sinners" partake in vices like liquor and sex, they are automatically assumed to be immoral. Gabriel, on the other hand, rejects these vices (although he has a history with them) and is therefore considered moral, even though he is an awful person otherwise. Baldwin repeatedly draws attention to this discrepancy, which underscores the obvious flaws of this rather basic assumption. This passage also reflects their sexist society; the women who "fight like men" have stepped outside of established gender roles and are therefore viewed as even more sinful.

Once, Roy and John watched a couple of "sinners" in a nearby basement, and "they did it standing up." John refused to watch again, but Roy, who told John "he had done it with some girls down the block," liked to watch. John's parents, Gabriel and Elizabeth, who go to church, do "it too," and sometimes John listens to them, "over the sound of rats' feet" and "rat screams" and the "**music** and cursing" coming from the "harlot's house downstairs."

The couple in this passage presumably aren't married, and therefore their union must take place in secret, like a dark and abandoned basement, furthering the idea that sex out of wedlock is sinful. The mention of rats makes sex appear dirty, and the association between the "harlot" and her music, which is presumably blues or jazz, makes this music evil as well.

The Temple of the Fire Baptized is "not the biggest church in Harlem," but it is "the holiest and best." Gabriel is "head deacon," but the pastor, Father James, preaches on Sundays and leads revivals. John's family is constantly late to church on Sundays, which is "always [Elizabeth's] fault." According to John's father, she can never get "the children ready on time." Upon arriving at church, they first go to Sunday school. John didn't use to pay attention, and this "earned him the wrath of his father," but near his fourteenth birthday, with the "pressures of church and home uniting to drive him to the alter," he wanted "to appear more serious."

When Gabriel blames Elizabeth for making them late for church, it is further evidence of his misogyny. They are his children too, yet he expects his wife to care for them alone, and then he criticizes her for not doing it up to his standards. Gabriel takes zero responsibility for his wife and family, beyond providing for them financially and forcing them to worship, and this speaks to his contemptable and sexist nature.

Appearing "more serious," however, is hard for John because of Elisha, his Sunday school teacher and Father James's nephew. Elisha is from Georgia, and at seventeen, he is "already saved" and a preacher. John frequently "stares" at Elisha during lessons, and he "admires" the "leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness" of him. Roy never pays attention either, presumably for different reasons, but it is "different" for him—no one expects from Roy what they expect from John.

John is clearly attracted to Elisha sexually, but the implication here is that John's religion believes homosexuality to be a mortal sin, and thus John struggles with what his sexual feelings mean for his morality.

Sunday service always begins with Elisha at the piano. To John, it seems as if "this **music** has been with [him]" ever since his "first drawn breath." The song doesn't much matter; it is the congregation's singing that makes John "believe in the presence of the Lord." John doesn't "feel it himself," but he never "doubts" that for those at church, it is "the very bread of life." Everyone insists that "one day," the "Power will possess" John.

This passage underscores the importance of music in religion, and it reflects Baldwin's use of music as a symbol of redemption, religious devotion, and moral uprightness. The congregation is brought closer to God through music, and it makes John a believer. Here, music is presented as a primary staple in their lives and religion, and is "the very bread of life"; this is a reference to John 6:35 (a fitting book of the Bible, given that the protagonist's name is also John), when Jesus proclaims, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

One Sunday after service, Father James had "uncovered sin in the congregation of the righteous." Elisha and Ella Mae, a young church member, were seen "walking disorderly" and "were in danger of straying from the truth." Father James told the congregation that Elisha and Ella Mae had not yet sinned by "plucking" the "unripe fig" from the tree "too early," but their behavior would surely lead to no good. Father James was only "exercising" his "duty" as the leader of their "flock," which isn't an easy task. The "way of holiness" and "the Word" is a "hard way," and celibacy until marriage is what is "demanded" by the "the way of the cross."

Elisha and Ella Mae have not had sex, but the mere possibility is enough to count as a mark against their morality according to Father James. Elisha, however, is a righteous young man, and it is assumed that Ella Mae is righteous too. Baldwin seems to imply here that they are not made immoral simply because they could possibly have sex at some point, and their innocent friendship should not be considered sinful either.

John wakes early in the morning on his fourteenth birthday, which is on a Saturday in March of 1935. The house is still and quiet, and he can feel a "menace in the air around him." Something "irrevocable" has happened deep inside John, and as he stares at a stain on the ceiling that transforms into "a woman's nakedness," he is sure that he has "sinned." In the quiet darkness, John feels as if all the world has been "saved," and he is left behind, "with his sinful body, to be bound in hell a thousand years."

The stain that is transformed into a naked woman is evidence of John's guilt and internal anguish over the sexual changes that are obviously taking place in his body. John is clearly pubescent and newly discovering sex, and since his religion has told him sex is a sin, he feels the natural changes occurring within his body are sinful as well.

John had "sinned with his hands" that which is "hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking of the boys." John has frequently been warned against this sin, but he has "made his decision." He won't "be like [Gabriel]." He will "have another life." Besides, John is smart and does well in school, and many have told him that he has "a Great Future" as "a Great Leader of His People." Leading people doesn't exactly interest John, but the encouragement has opened in his mind "a great brass gate," beyond which "people did not live in the darkness of his father's house." Beyond the gate, John is not forced to pray in his father's church, and he can "wear fine clothes," eat "good food," and visit the theater whenever he wants.

John has masturbated in the school bathroom, which is also considered a sin in his religion. Plus, John thinks of boys when he does it, which makes John even more sinful in the eyes of his religion. John is obviously a good person and is not an immoral sinner, but the restraints of Gabriel's religion—at least the way his particular religious community interprets Christian teachings—deems him as such. This passage also shows that John is empowered by his intelligence—as readers will soon learn was also the case with Richard, John's real father. However, that power is limited in Gabriel's house, just as Richard's power was limited in America's racist society.

It is not only black people who "praise John" (according to John, "colored people" cannot "really know") but white people too. Since he was a young child, John has been aware, be it with a "wild uneasiness," of his "individual existence." Even the school principal, a stern woman with "white hair," has told John he is "a very bright boy," and he considers his intellect to be like "a shield," or even "a weapon." Inside John is "a power that other people lack," and he will use it "to save himself, to raise himself," and perhaps win the "love which he so longed for."

Like Elizabeth and Florence, John also displays internalized racism. He believes that black people can't possibly know enough to appreciate how smart he is, and he believes the praise of white people to be more valuable. In other words, John suggests that black people are not as smart as white people. This deeply racist assumption is proved false by way of John's own intelligence, but his internalized prejudice doesn't allow him to see this.

John's intellect is part of his "identity," which means it is not "subject to death or alteration" or "destruction." But it is also part of the "wickedness for which [Gabriel] beats him" and what John clings to "in order to withstand his father." Despite Gabriel's cruelty, he never really wins. There is a part of John that his father can't "reach"—John's "hatred" and "intelligence"—and he can't wait for the day when he can "curse" his father "on his deathbed." Even though John has been raised "surrounded" by "saints" and "prayer," his "heart is hardened against the Lord." Gabriel is "the ambassador of the King of Heaven," and John can't "bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father," which John refuses to do.

Gabriel beats John in part because he is threatened by the power John's intellect commands—Gabriel knows that John's mind will open doors for him, and he wants to keep him down and oppress him. John resents his father, who embodies his religion, and he therefore resents religion and God as well.

At some point in the early morning, John falls asleep and wakes again to the sound of Roy arguing with Elizabeth. John enters the kitchen where his brother and mother are fighting. The room is "narrow and dirty," and no amount of scrubbing can "ever make it clean." Dirt covers every surface and stands in contrast to the scrubbed dishes and pots. The windows "gleam" against the perpetual dust that falls, and John thinks: "*He who is filthy, let him be filthy still.*" Is he not the one "who is filthy" after all?

This passage reveals that African Americans are only permitted to live in certain parts of the city, and those areas are run-down and undesirable. John and his family are kept down no matter how hard they work or, in this case, clean. Their home will always be dirty, and society assumes they are dirty by proxy. Plus, John has his perceived sexual sins eating away at his conscience, which makes him feel doubly "filthy."

John looks at Elizabeth's "perpetual scowl." His mother looks differently in his dreams. There, she is "young and proud," with a "beautiful" face that "no evil can undo." The differences between these "two faces" has created a "darkness" and "mystery" that scares John, and sometimes it makes him "hate" his mother. As John sits at the kitchen table, he feels uneasy. He is worried his family has forgotten his birthday again.

Elizabeth has a "perpetual scowl" because she has been beat down by the "evil" of her oppressive marriage to Gabriel, who assumes that both she and John are tainted with sin because John was born out of wedlock. John, of course, doesn't know this, but the stress of the situation has robbed Elizabeth of her beauty, which is the source of John's hatred for her.

Elizabeth and Roy continue their argument, which is about Gabriel. "*One* thing you can't say," Elizabeth says to Roy, "you can't say he ain't always done his best to be a father to you and to see to it that you ain't never gone hungry." Roy is irritated. "He got a belly, too, I *know* it's a *shame* the way that man eats." Roy claims he just doesn't want his father to beat him all the time. "I ain't no dog," Roy says. "Your Daddy beats you," Elizabeth answers, "because he loves you."

This, too, speaks to Gabriel's cruelty and the sins he commits against his family. He treats his son like a "dog," and he eats in a way that suggests he is a glutton, which the Bible also identifies as a sin. He doesn't feed his family because he loves them and it's his responsibility; he feeds them only because he is eating too. Gabriel is not as pure and holy as he claims, and Roy's complaints are evidence of this.

"Is Daddy a good man?" John asks Elizabeth without thinking. "Looks to me like he's a mighty good man," Sarah says. "He sure is praying all the time." Elizabeth tells her children they are simply too young to appreciate how "lucky" they are to have a father like Gabriel. Roy laughs. They aren't allowed to go to the theater or play with friends in the streets. Gabriel only wants them to pray and go to church. "Don't know what I done to be so lucky," Roy says.

John's question is rhetorical, as readers can see that Gabriel is far from good. He is completely disagreeable and dismissive of everyone, and then he hides his sins behind his religion. He uses religion to control and oppress his family, not enrich their lives or ensure their salvation, which Baldwin implies makes him immoral and sinful.

"You listen to your father," Elizabeth says to Roy, "I guarantee you, you won't end up in no jail." Roy becomes angry. "You think that's all that's in the world is jails and churches?" Roy asks her. "You ought to know better than that, Ma." Elizabeth quickly dismisses him and says, "There ain't no safety except you walk humble before the Lord." Elizabeth tells Roy to polish the woodworking in the dining room and tasks John with sweeping the front room. John agrees, as always. Indeed, it seems she does not remember his birthday.

Elizabeth's comment here isn't exactly true. Richard ended up in jail through no fault of his own, and neither religion nor a protective father could have saved him from the racist assumptions that prompted his arrest. Between Elizabeth's racist society and her oppressive religion, it may appear that "jails and churches" are all that exists, but Roy doesn't view the world in such a confined way.

Cleaning the rug in the front room is an impossible task. John can "sweep forever," but the rug is never clean. For every discarded pan of dirt, little "demons" bring in "twenty more." He thinks of the rug as an "impossible, lifelong task," like a man he read about who was "cursed" to "push a boulder" up a **mountain**, only to have it pushed back down again.

Cleaning the rug is a metaphor for John's oppressive life in a racist society. No matter how hard he works, he will always be marginalized, and he equates this to the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who is punished by Zeus. This myth symbolizes the futility of John's efforts to resist his oppression. This also harkens to Baldwin's use of mountains to symbolize the difficulty of maintaining a holy life. In this way, Baldwin implies that remaining holy is a futile task as well.

After sweeping the rug, John must "excavate" his family's "goods and gear" from the dust on the fireplace mantel. He begins with the mirror, and as he polishes it, he looks at his face. He looks the same as always. The "hand of Satan" is not "yet visible." Gabriel always tells John he is "ugly" and that he has "the face of Satan," but John doesn't see Satan when he looks in the mirror. As he studies his face, John can't answer the question he "most passionately desires to know: whether his face is ugly or not."

This passage begins to reveal the ways in which Gabriel psychologically abuses John. As the book will later reveal, Gabriel believes John is tainted by his birth and that this makes him inherently evil. Gabriel doesn't tell John that he isn't his biological son, but he doesn't treat him the same as the other children and tells him he is "ugly." This torments John and, as evidenced by the question he "most passionately desires" to know the answer to, has consumed most of his thoughts.

John begins to dust the objects on the mantel without "seeing" them, including cards and pictures, "flowered mottoes," and a metal snake "poised to strike." Engraved in one of the mottoes is a spiritual saying welcoming all worshippers to God, and the other is a biblical quote from the Gospel of John. "*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever should believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*" Between the mottoes was the snake, "biding the time to strike."

The fact that John dusts without seeing the objects invites the reader to pay extra attention to them. The snake, "poised to strike" between the religious mottoes, perhaps suggests that religion is innately dangerous and even deadly. Snakes are also symbolic of evil in the Bible, and when that symbol is applied here it is reminiscent of the latent evil that lurks waiting to tempt the innocent to sin. The Bible verse, which comes from John 3:16, also serves as a personal message to John—he is not a sinner and needs only to believe in God to be saved.

On the mantel are pictures of John and his siblings, but John is the only one who is naked. He is just an infant in the picture, but John feels "shame and anger" at his nakedness. There is a photo of Gabriel's sister, John's Aunt Florence, and one of Elizabeth taken after her marriage to John's father. There is even a photo of Gabriel, taken long ago in the South when he was married to a woman named Deborah, who is "now in Heaven." John finds it strange thinking about Deborah. Had she lived, John would never have been born. She knew Gabriel before John ever did, and John wonders if she would know "how to make his father love him."

John resents his naked picture because it makes him feel judged and therefore more vulnerable. His siblings all wear clothes, which suggests they aren't judged nearly as harshly as John is. The humiliation of the naked picture is reserved just for John, and it serves as a constant reminder of his vulnerability. Ironically, had Deborah lived, John would still have been born, since Gabriel is not his biological father. Here, Baldwin seems to imply that John would have been much better off had Deborah lived and Gabriel not come into his life.

With his work finished, John stares out the window at the neighborhood boys playing stickball. He wants to play with them but knows he can't. He longs to be with the "boys in the street, heedless and thoughtless, wearing out his treacherous and bewildering body." Suddenly, Elizabeth calls to him from the kitchen. He goes to her, and she holds out her hand to him. "I didn't never ask you," she says giving him a small pile of coins, "what you wanted for your birthday. But you take this, son, and go out and get yourself something you think you want."

Gabriel believes that playing in the streets with the other children is sinful behavior, and he therefore doesn't allow John to do it. John is a child, yet he is denied play, which seems a particularly cruel thing to do. Additionally, Baldwin's language here is subtly sexual. When John looks at the boys, he longs to "wear out his treacherous and bewildering body." The word "bewildering" further suggests that John is confused or puzzled by his sexual feelings towards other boys and men.

John smiles and takes the money. "I know," Elizabeth says, "there's a whole lot of things you don't understand." Her words are kind as she smiles. "You put your faith in the Lord, Johnny, and He'll surely bring you out." She tells him that "everything works together good" for those who "love the Lord." She seems to "know he is in trouble." John's "trouble" is "also her own," but John knows that they aren't talking about the same thing. If she truly knew of John's "trouble," she would most certainly be "angry and no longer proud of him."

John's sexual thoughts are "troubling" him, and he fears his mother will be "angry" and "no longer proud" if she knows the truth. Elizabeth is, of course, referring to the secret of John's identity as Richard's son. Here, Baldwin seems to suggest that neither John's sexuality nor his identity are sinful, and John must simply love the Lord (and be a good person) to be saved.

John leaves the house and heads in the direction of Central Park with his coins. At the "center of the park," outside the path where white women and men walk their dogs, is a small **mountain**. John knows the path to the hill as if "by instinct," and at the top is the "brilliant sky" and the New York City skyline. The view gives him "a sense of power," and he runs to the top, ready to "throw himself headlong into the city that glows before him." At the "summit," John stops for a moment. The city below has "no love for him." The people there don't "see him," and if they do, they "smirk." Gabriel claims that John's soul will "find perdition" in the city.

This moment reflects Baldwin's use of mountains as a symbol for the difficult road of the holy life. The top of the mountain—the "summit"—is considered holy, and sin is at the bottom. Sin is everywhere, and remaining saved is a treacherous, uphill battle. The city serves as a metaphor for sin, as it is, presumably, full of liquor and sex. Plus, John also has racism to contend with. The city has "no love for him" because he is black. He is marginalized and ignored by society, and if he is noticed, he is met with scorn.

John has seen the "marks of Satan" on people's faces as they wait in lines outside of theaters. The movie posters hanging on the buildings "invite people to sin," and the "roar of the damned" fills Broadway. The road leading to "death" is "broad," but the road that leads to "life eternal" is "narrow." This "narrow way, the way of the cross," leads to "humiliation forever" and life and job like Gabriel's. Looking to the bottom of the **mountain**, John begins to run. "If it's wrong, I can always climb back up," he thinks to himself.

Again, the city is viewed as a hotbed of sin and corruption. The movies and shows at the movie houses and Broadway theaters are considered sinful, and the people who frequent them are therefore sinful as well. This blanket assumption is ridiculous, and John appears to know this, which is why he runs down the mountain—he can turn around and head back if he is wrong.

On Fifth Avenue, John sees "graceful women in fur coats" shopping for "silk dresses, and watches, and rings." John wonders what church they all go to. Some of these people have been nice to him, and it is "hard to think of them burning in Hell forever." But Gabriel says that "all white people are wicked," and that they are not "to be trusted." According to John's father, "not one of them has ever loved a [n____]," and since "John is a [n____]," he will soon learn "how evil white people can be." John has heard stories from the South of slavery and death and "worse."

The stark difference between Fifth Avenue and John's part of town reflects their racist society. The people shopping there are well-dressed and used to luxury, but John's family is forced to live in filth. John assumes the people are going to Hell because they don't go to church, but Gabriel believes they are going to Hell because they are white. John is further removed from slavery than Gabriel is (Gabriel's mother was a slave) and his deep resentment of white people is evidence of the historical trauma caused by slavery.

Black people are "forbidden" to live in this part of the city, but no one bothers John as he walks down the street. Still, he doesn't "dare" enter any of the shops, as "this world is not for him." Off Fifth Avenue are the movie houses, and this is John's favorite part of the city—not because of the theaters but because of the library. John has a library card issued from the Harlem branch, which gives him the right to borrow books from any library in the city, but he never goes into the sprawling building full of white people. Once he has read all the books in Harlem, John will go in. Then, he will have "the poise to enter any building in the world."

John is invisible as he walks down the street. Segregation says that he can't live near Fifth Avenue, but the white people there don't notice him unless he tries to enter one of their buildings. John's love for the library is evidence of his intelligence (and suggests he's just as good, if not better, than anybody else), but he will never enter this library. John will never read all the books in the Harlem library, which means he will never think himself good enough to enter the big library in the white part of the city.

John stops outside a movie house and decides to go in. He buys a ticket quickly and rushes in the door "for fear that one of the saints might" see him. Sitting in the darkness, John tries to make himself "invisible" to "deny his presence there." The movie begins and features a "most evil" woman. She is promiscuous and drinks, and she "never thinks of prayer."

The members of John's church are referred to as "saints," and he fears one of them will see him sinning by going to the movies. Additionally, the "evil" woman in the movie supports sexist assumptions that all women are inherently "evil."

The woman dies, and John thinks about "her dreadful end." If it weren't "blasphemous," John would think that the Lord brought him to the movies to "show him an example of the wages of sin." He thinks of "his soul's redemption" and "struggles to find a compromise between" the road that leads to "life everlasting" and the road that leads to "the pit." It is a "narrow way" for sure, John thinks, and he grows uncomfortable. To him, it seems like "God's injustice" that he is forced to "make so cruel a choice."

This again equates women with sin and evil. The woman, presumably, doesn't die because she is sinful, but John assumes she has. The movie clearly objectifies and demonizes women, but John is not a sinner simply because he has watched it, but he believes this to be true as well. This is a manifestation of John's false assumptions of what kind of people populate "the pit," and it also speaks to how restrictive and oppressive his religion is.

Later, as John returns home, he feels "weary." From down the street, he sees Sarah run out the front door of their house and head in the opposite direction, toward the drug store. By the time John reaches the house, Sarah is coming back with supplies from the store, and he notices that there is blood on the steps leading up to the house. "Roy got stabbed with a knife," she yells and runs into the house. Aunt Florence is there too, and she meets John at the door. "This bad brother of yours done gone out and got hisself hurt," she says softly. John can tell by the tone of her voice there is no real danger. Roy is not "going to die."

John's "weary" feeling as he returns home is a product of his heavy thoughts and his belief that he is sinner, but it also foreshadows the trouble that he encounters when he gets home and finds that Roy's been stabbed. John doesn't seem surprised that Roy has been hurt; Roy leads a life of trouble and, according to John, sin, so it isn't a stretch to assume that something awful would someday happen. Florence deeply cares for John, unlike his father, and she doesn't want to cause him undue stress, so she immediately lets him know that Roy will be okay.

"I'm sure going to be having some questions to ask you in a minute, old lady," Gabriel yells to Elizabeth. "I'm going to be wanting to know just how come you let this boy go out and get half killed." Florence steps in suddenly. "Oh, no, you ain't," she says sternly. No one *let* Roy do anything, she says, Roy does what he wants. Elizabeth "can't put no ball and chain on him," she says. "She got her hands full right here in this house, and it ain't her fault if Roy got a head just hard as his father's."

This passage is also evidence of Gabriel's misogynistic beliefs: he believes it is Elizabeth's fault alone that Roy has gotten into trouble and refuses to take any responsibility for their *son. He refers to Elizabeth as "old lady," which itself is meant to be disrespectful, and he clearly believes himself to be superior to both Elizabeth and their children.*

"You got an awful lot to say," Gabriel says to Florence. "It's just the mercy of God that this boy didn't lose his eye. Look here," he says to John, forcing him to look at Roy's face. His forehead has been gashed by a knife, slicing his eyebrow in half. Over time Roy's scar will fade, but the "violently divided eyebrow" will stay forever. "You see?" Gabriel asks. It was a group of white boys who had cut Roy. "*This* is what white folks does to [n____s]. I been telling you, now you see."

This, too, is proof of the trauma caused by slavery and racism. In Gabriel's experience having been born to a former slave and growing up during Reconstruction and Jim Crow, white people overwhelmingly mean to do black people harm, and while this is not necessarily John's experience (the racism he experiences can't be denied but pales compared to what Rachel endured under slavery), he is raised to believe this is true.

Elizabeth reminds Gabriel that Roy had tried to cut the white boys too and wasn't exactly innocent. "I reckon you know," says Gabriel sarcastically, "all about a mother's love." He asks her "how a woman can sit in the house all day" while her son goes and gets "half butchered." Gabriel remembers his own mother, Rachel. "God rest her soul," he says, "*she'd* have found a way." Florence laughs. "She didn't find no way to stop *you*," she says. Elizabeth turns to her husband. No, she can't stop him, she says, but neither can Gabriel. "Ain't nobody to *blame*, Gabriel," she says.

Gabriel again is cruel to Elizabeth. He implies that she isn't a good mother and doesn't love Roy because she failed to protect him, but what Gabriel doesn't acknowledge is that if it was a failure that led to Roy's attack, it is his as much as Elizabeth's. This also establishes Gabriel as a hypocrite; he behaved just like Roy when he was young, and Rachel couldn't stop him, but he still compares Elizabeth to his own mother and suggests that Elizabeth is lacking.

Gabriel looks at Elizabeth and, "with all his might," reaches out and "slaps her across the face." Roy sits up instantly. "Don't you slap my mother," he says. "That's my *mother*. You slap her again, you black bastard, and I swear to God I'll kill you." Gabriel stares at his son. "Gabriel," Elizabeth interrupts. "Let us pray…" Gabriel silently removes his belt and begins to beat Roy. Roy cowers and "shivers" but doesn't make a noise.

Gabriel violently abuses both Elizabeth and Roy, and as Elizabeth is also pregnant and Roy has just been stabbed, this makes Gabriel's actions even more deplorable. When Roy challenges Gabriel and calls him a "black bastard," he effectively strips Gabriel of his power, which he then attempts to regain through physical violence.

As Gabriel winds up to strike Roy again, Florence approaches and stops his arm midair. "Yes, Lord," she says to him, "you was born wild, and you's going to die wild. You can't change nothing, Gabriel. You ought to know that by now."

Florence's comment implies that Gabriel is innately sinful, and there is no amount of religion that can overcome it. Gabriel is a terrible person, and everything he does is proof of this.

By six o'clock that night, John opens the church for "tarry service." Service doesn't begin until eight, and people usually don't arrive until eight thirty, as the Lord is "sufficiently tolerant to allow the saints time" for "Saturday-night shopping" and house cleaning. As John enters the church, the silence "presses on him, cold as judgement."

In the Pentecostal denomination of Christianity, "tarry service" is held for the congregation to pray and wait for God's salvation. Ironically, before the congregation "tarries," God must first wait for them. This implies that perhaps God isn't as important to them as they profess, which again makes their religion appear hypocritical.

"Praise the Lord," Elisha says as he enters the church. John welcomes Elisha and the two begin to banter back and forth. Elisha's presence causes John's "mood to change," and their teasing and joking increases. Suddenly, Elisha "rushes" at John, lifting him off the ground in a friendly wresting match. John "struggles and squirms," and begins to hit Elisha's shoulders and arms. He "thrusts his knees against Elisha's belly" and is "determined" not to be "conquered." As John is "filled with a wild delight," they stumbled over the chairs, and Elisha's hold breaks. They sit awhile, recovering and smiling, and then get up to clean the church for tarry service.

John and Elisha's interaction here is full of sexual tension. John's mood changes because he is attracted to Elisha, but whether Elisha is attracted to him is never confirmed. Baldwin's language is again vaguely sexual—John "thrusts" his knees into Elisha, and he doesn't want to be "conquered." John's "wild delight" reflects this as well, and he is more than happy to be in such proximity to Elisha's body.

"Boy, ain't it time you was thinking about your soul?" Elisha asks John as they clean. Elisha says John still has "Adam's mind" and is thinking too much about friends, and girls, and movies. "When the Lord saves you," John says, "He burns out all that old Adam," and you then "get all your joy in walking and talking with Jesus." He warns John that too many people think they can "sneak into Heaven on their deathbed," but not "everybody lies down to die," Elisha says.

The fact that Elisha asks about John's soul directly after their wrestling match suggests that their interaction—and John's attraction to Elisha—is sinful, and therefore John's soul needs salvation. According to Elisha, no one knows when they will die, which makes salvation a pressing issue. Elisha also implies that once John is saved, he will cease to have sinful thoughts.

"Do you want to be saved, Johnny," Elisha asks. "I don't know," John answers. Elisha asks him to try. "Just fall on your knees one day and ask him to help you pray," Elisha says. Suddenly, the church doors open, and two saints, Sister McCandless and Sister Price enter. "Praise the Lord, son," they say. Sister McCandless is a big woman, "one of the biggest and blackest God has ever made," and she has a voice and presence for preaching. She travels all over the North doing the Lord's work. She is planning to soon go out "into the field" to preach, and she has "**buckled on her traveling shoes**."

John's indecisiveness is evidence of his internal struggle and anguish. To be saved means John would have to deny a large part of who he is, and John doesn't seem to think this is a fair trade. Sister Tharpe's gospel song, which Baldwin refers to at the beginning of the book, contains a line that says, "I buckled up my shoes and I started," and the reference to Sister McCandless buckling up her "traveling shoes" is reminiscent of this as well.

Sister Price and Sister McCandless visit with Elisha and John a bit, mostly talking about how wonderful Father James is. "Indeed, that is the truth," Sister Price says. Not every pastor will "set down his own nephew" for "no big fault." Sister McCandless interrupts. "Ain't no such thing as a little or a big fault," she says. "You is in the Word or you *ain't*—ain't no halfway with God." She suggests they sing a **song** to begin their service as they wait for the other saints, and Elisha begins to play the piano.

Sister McCandless's comment that there is no difference between a "little fault" and a "big fault" is useful in thinking about Gabriel. Gabriel insists that he is saved, and his name is in the "Book of Life," but Sister McCandless's theory (and Gabriel's sinful behavior) means that he isn't really "in the Word." This implies that it is Gabriel, not John, who should repent.

Elisha plays "**This May be My Last Time**," and they all begin to sing. "*This may be the last time I pray with you, / This may be my last time, I don't know.*" John tries "not to hear the words" as he sings with the others. He doesn't want to sing, but he knows they will "force" him if he doesn't. Still, he refuses to clap. John's "heart" tells him that he has "no right to sing or rejoice.

Elisha's chosen song reflects his previous statement that no one knows when they will die. As most don't know, each time one sits down to pray, it could quite literally be the last time. John equates music with religious devotion and purity, and since he believes he is a sinner, he finds it difficult to sing.

The church doors again open, and Gabriel walks in with Elizabeth and Florence. John has never actually seen Florence in church before, but now it seems as if she has been "summoned to witness a bloody act." God appears to have led her to the church for some reason. "The Lord is riding on the wind tonight," John thinks, "what might that wind" speak?

This passage foreshadows the upcoming events on the threshing-floor and John's subsequent salvation. It also harkens to Florence's spiritual experience. She isn't saved quite in the same way John is, but she does find some peace in going to church, even if it only gives her an opportunity to confront Gabriel and achieve some lasting closure before she dies.

PART 2: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS: FLORENCE'S PRAYER

Sitting in the church, Florence begins to sing the only religious **song** she knows, one she can remember her mother, Rachel, singing long ago. "*It's me, it's me, it's me, oh, Lord, / Standing in the need of prayer,*" Florence sings. Gabriel looks to his sister and "rejoices" that she has finally come to the Lord. He is happy not because Florence has found God but because she is obviously "suffering," which makes him delighted. Florence's "pride" stands up and the "resolution" that had brought her to the church begins to "falter." If Gabriel is really "the Lord's anointed," Florence thinks, "she would rather die and endure Hell for all eternity than bow before his alter."

Florence's song implies that she, too, is in need of prayer. This also reflects the power of music and its ability to bring worshippers closer to God. Gabriel's joy in Florence's suffering is more evidence of his wicked nature. As a preacher, he should be happy that his sister has come to God, regardless of the reason, because she will, according to him, find peace and joy there. Instead, he is happy because she is obviously miserable, and this also suggests he is immoral and a sinner.

Florence continues to sing and thinks about Rachel. Florence's entire life, "sixty groaning years," has led her to her "mother's starting-place, the alter of the Lord." But Florence has forgotten how to pray. Her heart is full of "hatred and bitterness," and her "pride refuses to abdicate from the throne it had held so long." It is not Florence's "humility" that has brought her to church tonight—it is "only fear."

This passage paints religion in a rather unflattering light. Florence is brought to God not because he is a comfort in her time of need, but because she is afraid of what will happen if she doesn't. Florence is sick and will soon die, and she is afraid that perhaps God will punish her for eternity in Hell because she has turned her back on him.

Florence believes that crying and throwing one's self on the alter is "indecent" behavior and is something only "common [n____s]" do. She herself has never done this, and now she feels it is "too late." Florence remembers a biblical phrase and whispers it now: "Lord, help my unbelief." She has recently been thinking of Hezekiah's message, "*Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live*," and it has been keeping her up at night. There has been plenty of time to "turn to God," but Florence has "thought to evade him." Florence's "pain" and "sickness" has been increasing. Her bowels "burn," and she "vomits up her food." Lately, "death" has been "standing in the room," and while it has gone for now, "it will be back."

This is another reflection of Florence's internal racism. She considers throwing one's self on the altar a bad thing, so she equates it with the behavior of "common [n____s]." Florence is sick and is dying, and she is looking to get her spiritual house in order, so to speak. Florence's faith in God has been weak, and she only comes to God when she is running out of time. Florence is a bitter and hateful woman, but Baldwin doesn't portray her as unworthy of God's salvation, and as she finds some level of closure after her final interaction with Gabriel, it is implied that she is successful in "setting her house in order."

Florence can still hear Rachel praying late at night in their cabin in the South. "We come before You on our knees the evening to ask You to watch over us and hold back the hand of the destroying angel," Rachel would say. One night, Rachel began to pray especially hard. Deborah, a local sixteen-year-old girl, had been attacked by "many white men" who made her "cry and bleed." Deborah's father had threatened to kill the men, and they had beat him and "left him for dead." The white men threatened to "set fire to all the houses, as they had done before."

Florence's flashback serves as evidence of the violent racism present in the South during the Reconstruction Era. Deborah's white rapists are the guilty ones, yet Rachel worries that the rapists will burn down their *houses. Deborah's attack also reflects her rapists' misogyny. They assume power over her physically and sexually because she is a black woman, and they deprive her of her right to say no. Rachel attempts to calm her own fears related to the attack through prayer, and it is this type of fear that has resulted in Gabriel's hatred of white people. In his own experience, they frequently mean to cause him harm, and he instills this fear into his own children as well.*

"I ain't afraid," a young Gabriel proudly asserted. "You hush, now!" Rachel yelled, listening to the fading horse hoofs outside. "They's gone," she said, relieved. Rachel had been born during slavery, and she always referred to Florence and Gabriel "as the children of her old age." She had given birth to four children before Florence and Gabriel, but they had all been taken from her. Still, she believed that the Lord would "send deliverance," and he did. "Rise up, rise up, Sister Rachel, and see the Lord's deliverance!" a fellow slave yelled into her door one day. "He done brought us out of Egypt, just like He promised, and we's free at last!" Rachel gathered a small bag of belongings and left the plantation, "never to see that country any more."

As Rachel was born as slave, this affects Gabriel and Florence's lives as well, even though slavery was abolished by the time they were born. They have four siblings that they will never know, all because Rachel's "white master" deprive her of her inherent right to her own children. Rachel is set free, but this is not an end to racism and her problems. She still worries that a mob of white people will burn down her home, and Deborah's rape is an example of how white men treat young black women. There is much to fear and much to mourn, and this trauma lives on from generation to generation.

It had become Florence's "deep ambition" to walk out of the cabin the same way Rachel had walked off the plantation. Florence's own father had left too, not long after Gabriel was born, and for as long as she can remember, Florence had always wanted to move North. Rachel was "content" to stay in the South and work for "white folks," and she wanted Florence "to be content" as well, but she had refused. Rachel expected Florence to cook and clean and keep Gabriel "quiet."

Florence is expected to fulfill a traditional gender role and marry and have a family, but she resists this ideal, which she finds oppressive and limiting. She equates this traditional role with the slavery her mother has been liberated from, and she won't be "content" to spend her life serving anyone, least of all white people. She believes that she will find more opportunity in the North, where she thinks there will be less racism, but the book will soon prove that this isn't true.

Gabriel "was a manchild" and therefore more important than Florence. Rachel thought of this as "logic," since Gabriel would grow up to be a man and "do man's work." He was given meat and new clothes (it there was any to be had), and Florence was given nothing but work. Rachel claimed that Gabriel needed the "indulgence of his womenfolk," and he was given the education that may have been Florence's had he not been born. Florence desired an education "far more" than Gabriel, and he managed to lean "almost nothing at all."

As another reflection of their sexist society, Gabriel is given preferential treatment because he is a boy, and Florence is made to sacrifice because she is a girl. She must give up things she dearly wants to benefit her brother, and he squanders the opportunities, which only fuels Florence's resentment for him. Florence's hatred of men stems from her relationship with her brother and their mother's treatment.

Gabriel was an awful child who often got into "mischief." Rachel would beat him with a "switch from a tree," and afterward, when he was left crying, his face wet with "mucous" and his pants around his ankles, Rachel would force him to kneel as she prayed.

This paints Rachel's religion in a particularly unflattering light. The image of Rachel beating her son until he can't stand and then praying over him is incredibly strong, and it makes her religion appear violent and corrupt.

Florence had become good friends with Deborah after Deborah's "accident," and together they "hated all men." Both men and women considered Deborah "a harlot" and looked no further than "her unlovely and violated body." The white men had "robbed her of the right to be considered a woman," and she had become a "living reproach." Deborah was convinced that "all men" were awful, and that "they lived only to gratify on the bodies of women their brutal and humiliating needs."

The community's opinion of Deborah after her tragic attack is completely misogynistic. It isn't Deborah fault she was violently assaulted; she certainly didn't ask for it, yet she is the one made to pay, not her rapists. While Deborah's attack was likely rooted in racism as well, it is also rooted in the fact that the men believed they could take whatever they wanted from her without thought or consequence, and society's reaction to Deborah proves that this is the sad reality.

Florence can still remember when Gabriel was baptized. He had "not wished to be baptized," and as he was, he began to "kick and sputter." He would come late at night, "vomit-covered," and Florence despised him. "I hate him!" she would yell. "Big, black, prancing tomcat of a [n____]!" Deborah would try to talk sense to her. "You know, honey," Deborah would say, "the Word tells us to hate the sin but not the sinner."

Florence says earlier that Gabriel is essentially bad, and his resistance to being baptized reflects this as well. Gabriel "kicks and sputters" because he is a sinner and morally corrupt, and his body reacts in kind. This passage further reflects Florence's internalized racism as well. She hates Gabriel, so uses a racial slur, which is obviously meant to hurt him and strip him of power and dignity.

When Florence was twenty-six in 1900, she decided to go North. "Ma," Florence said. "I'm going. I'm a-going this morning." Both Rachel and Gabriel were shocked. Rachel's health had been failing for some time, and she wasn't expected to live. "You mean to tell me the Devil's done made your heart so hard you can just leave your mother on her dying bed, and you don't care if you don't never see her in this world no more?" Rachel asked. "I'm going, Ma," Florence said. "I got to go."

Gabriel and Rachel consider Florence selfish and evil for leaving, but they never stop to consider why she is leaving. Florence has little opportunity or respect in the South, and while the North is bad as well, it will be a somewhat better life for her. Here, Gabriel and Florence are selfish and sinful as well, as they believe Florence should stay for their *benefit.*

Gabriel begged Florence to stay. Rachel "needs a woman" to care for her, he said. "Girl, ain't you got no feelings at *all*?" Gabriel asked Florence. As Florence walked out of the cabin, Rachel cried and prayed. "Lord, Lord, Lord! Lord, have mercy on my sinful daughter!" Florence turned and faced Gabriel one last time before she left. "If you ever see me again, I won't be wearing rags like yours," she said.

Gabriel's comment that Rachel "needs a woman" to care for her reflects his sexist assumptions. Since women are viewed as caretakers, he believes it is automatically Florence's responsibility to stay with Rachel. Florence wants the opportunity promised in the North, not the poverty she has been raised in.


In the church in Harlem, all is silent except for the sound of prayer, but John's mind is full of "doubt and searching." Mother Washington and her granddaughter, Ella Mae, have just arrived, and Mother Washington is behind Florence, "helping her to pray." Florence is completely still and silent, and John thinks she is sleeping. He looks around the church and wonders why the saints all come here, "night after night after night, calling out to a God who cares nothing for them." John's eyes circle back around to Florence and Mother Washington, who is staring directly at him.

John believes that God "cares nothing for them" because God has allowed black people to be enslaved, oppressed, and abused by white people for generations. Christianity justifies slavery through vague biblical stories (which Baldwin later points out) and only serves to oppress them further through perpetuating this justification, yet the saints continue to pray and worship God. John implies that if God truly cared for them, he would give them salvation in this life, and not make them die first to get it.


Florence's late husband, Frank, "drank too much" and "sang the **blues**." Once he grew a "tiny mustache," but Florence said it made him look "like a half-breed gigolo" and made him shave it. He was always good that way, cutting his hair or changing his clothes when she said, and he even went to "Uplift meetings" with her and listened to "prominent Negroes" talk. Florence had thought "she controlled him" but this was "entirely and disastrously false."

"Uplift meetings" refers to an African American social movement in the early 1900s that sought to "lift up" black Americans in society. The movement was sparked by W. E. B. Du Bois and his book, The Souls of Black Folk, in which he asks black Americans: "How does it feel to be a problem?" The movement addressed the civil rights of black Americans, and Florence obviously supports it. Du Bois as well as Booker T. Washington would have been among the "prominent Negroes" Florence listened to.

Frank had left Florence after ten years of marriage, over twenty years ago now. Back then, he was rarely home, and they frequently fought. One day he came home after being gone for two days. "All right, baby," Frank said. "I guess you don't never want to see me no more, not a miserable black sinner like me." And then he left. "He'll come back," Florence had thought, "and he'll come back drunk." But Frank never came back. He lived with another woman for a while and then died in France during World War I.

Notably, when Florence meets Elizabeth, she tells her that Frank is dead, but she neglects to tell her that he had left her years before his death. Florence is obviously ashamed of her separation and regardless of Frank's behavior, she seems to love him deep down. Frank certainly stays away, wastes money, and drinks too much, but he is usually kind to Florence. Compared to Gabriel, Frank is a saint.

It had been Florence's "great mistake" to love Frank "so bitterly." She believes that "all women" have been "cursed from the cradle" to "suffer the weight of men," but Frank had believed otherwise. He said it "was men who suffered because they had to put up with the ways of women." But Florence knows now as she did then that she is right, and that Frank had been "determined to live and die a common n___."

This again speaks to Florence's internalized racism. Society assumes that black men are no good, and Florence likewise believes this. Still, Florence loves him "bitterly" and can't deny her feelings, which she constantly struggles with. She wants to hate Frank, but she can't.

Frank had never been able to buy Florence a house, or anything else for that matter. It wasn't that Frank "could not make money, but that he could not save it," and he frequently spent their money on "useless objects." Once, "half drunk," he had spent all their money on a vase for Florence, "she who never noticed flowers" and "certainly" would not buy any. Another time, he spent all their grocery money for the week on a whole turkey (still with a head and feathers) and five pounds of coffee. He thought it would be a surprise. "The only surprise I want from you is to learn sense! *That'd* be a surprise!" Florence had yelled at him. "You think I want to stay around here the rest of my life with these dirty [n____s] you all the time bring home?"

Frank buys Florence flowers because, as a woman, she is supposed to like them, but Florence isn't a stereotypical woman. She doesn't gush over the beauty of flowers, and she thinks they are a waste of money. Frank's "surprise" also means increased work for Florence. Since the turkey still has its head and feathers, Florence will have to behead it and pluck before she can cook it. Florence's comment to Frank about the "dirty [n____s]" he brings around is of course racist, and it is obviously meant to hurt him. Florence implies that Frank and his friends are dirty simply because they are black, and this again reflects their racist society and Florence's internalized racism.

Florence's harsh words had trailed into the next room where Frank's friends sat. "And what you want me to do, Florence?" Frank had asked her. "You want me to turn white?" He continued. "Who's acting like a common [n____] now?" he asked his wife. His friends are in the next room, Frank reminded her, probably thinking: "Poor Frank, he sure found him a common wife."

Here, Frank implies that if Florence believes that black people are no good, she need look no further than herself. Florence's resentment of men and the assumptions of her racist society have blinded Florence to how hurtful and offensive her behavior here really is.

While Frank and Florence frequently fought, she often felt his "love" and "tenderness" was "real." He would often come to her at night in bed, and she would try to refuse him. "Let me alone Frank," she would say. "Stop." Frank would kiss her face and breasts, smelling of whiskey. "I ain't going to stop," he would say. "This is sweet talk, baby."

Here, Frank speaks softly and appears to be loving and kind, but what he is actually doing is denying Florence the right to say no to his sexual advances. This, too, suggests that Frank sees sex as something that is owed to him as a man; and as a woman, Florence can't deny him. Baldwin seems to imply that while Frank is gentle and uses "sweet talk," what his behavior amounts to is rape.

For ten years Frank and Florence fought, and now she wonders if she had "been wrong to fight so hard." Florence is an "old woman, and all alone," and she is dying. She thinks of Deborah, who married Gabriel and kept in touch after Florence moved North. Florence has a letter in her purse now that she always wanted to show Gabriel but never did. Florence had even told Frank about the letter one night when she was rubbing "bleaching cream" on her skin.

Florence bleaches her skin because her internalized racism has told her that she can't be both black and beautiful. This is similar to Elizabeth's straightened hair; society equates beauty with whiteness, so Florence and Elizabeth attempt to modify their own bodies to fit this impossible, and false, ideal of beauty.

"[Deborah] say she think my brother's got a bastard living right there in the same town what he's scared to call his own," Florence told Frank. Frank was immediately confused. Gabriel is supposed to be a preacher. "Being a preacher ain't never stopped a [n____] from doing his dirt," Florence said. Anyway, Gabriel has "no right to be preacher," Florence told Frank, and if the letter is true, he is "no better than a murderer." Gabriel sent the girl, Esther, away, Florence told Frank, and she died after giving birth.

Florence implies that Gabriel isn't morally upright simply because he is a preacher, and this seems to be one of Baldwin's overarching arguments. Morality is more than merely claiming to follow God; it is actually living a righteous life and treating people well. Gabriel treats everyone in his life like trash, and then he hides behind his religion.

Frank was silent. "I don't know why you keep wasting all your time and *my* money on all them old skin whiteners," he said to Florence. "You as black now as you was the day you was born." Florence said he wasn't there when she was born. "And I know you don't want a coal-clack woman." Frank disagreed. "I'll make you to know that black's a mighty pretty color," he said.

Florence's attempts to bleach her skin are futile, and Frank points this out. He disagrees with Florence and believes that black is beautiful, but his reference to his *money is sexist. Florence works too, thus their money is not only his, but Frank assumes that it is.*

Holding the letter now, Florence considers it "an instrument" to "complete [Gabriel's] destruction." Florence grows angry, filling with "terror and rage." Why had God "preferred [Rachel] and [Florence's] brother, the old, black woman, and the low, black man," while Florence is made to "die, alone and in poverty?" Florence gathers her anger and slams her fists onto the church's altar. "Call on Him, daughter!" Mother Washington yells from behind her. "Call on the Lord!"

Mother Washington assumes that Florence is moved by the Lord when she strikes the altar, but she is moved by hatred and anger. Deborah's letter gives Florence a feeling of power over Gabriel. She can make trouble for him in his marriage and his church if she tells them about his storied past, and Florence is hoping the threat will be enough to make Gabriel see the error of his ways.

PART 2: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS: GABRIEL'S PRAYER

As Florence weeps, Gabriel "talks to the Lord." Listening to Florence, he doesn't hear his sister but "the cry of the sinner when he is taken in his sin." In his righteousness, Gabriel yells out, "Have your way, Lord! Have your way!" and the entire congregation falls quiet. Not even Mother Washington utters a prayer, and the "silence" envelopes the church.

Baldwin's language here reflects America's sexist society. At the sound of Florence's cries, Gabriel hears "the cry of the sinner when he *is taken in* his *sin." Gabriel is referring to his sister, yet his language is exclusive and specifically geared toward men.*

The "silence" takes Gabriel back to before his "birth in Christ," before he was saved. Everything before that point is "wrapped in darkness" for Gabriel, and the dark deeds he committed there are "not now counted against him" because he is "redeemed." The quiet of the church reminds Gabriel of the "silence of the early morning" when he was young and would return home "from the harlot's house." In the silence of those mornings, his mother, Rachel, had waited for him, not just to return home after a night out, but to finally come to the Lord.

God may not hold Gabriel's sins against him now that he is redeemed, but others in his life surely will. Florence counts his sins against him, and so did Deborah before she died. Gabriel's children certainly don't think him redeemed for his abuse of them, and Elizabeth is just as tortured. Gabriel is so concerned with the next life that he has neglected to attend to the one he is living now.

Rachel had once been "impatient" and "violent" waiting for Gabriel to come to the Lord. She had "shouted and contended like a man" but then grew silent. She "contended only, and with the last measure of her strength, with God. And this, too, she did like a man." She had "faith" in God and knew Gabriel would finally come to his senses. So, she waited quietly, and "her eyes, even when she closed her lids to sleep, would follow [Gabriel] everywhere."

While women behaving like men is generally a bad thing and viewed as sinful in the novel, here it is seen as a compliment. It requires faith and strength for Rachel to wait for Gabriel to come to the Lord, and here it is implied that men are better suited for this task than women. Thus, Rachel contends "like a man," and Gabriel eventually sees the light.

Gabriel wanted the "power" known only to "God's anointed," but he took his time coming to God. Deborah would often visit Rachel, and she looked at Gabriel "with eyes that were no less patient and reproachful" than his mother's. He would leave each night, to feed his "lust" and drink, and Gabriel would feel his "mother's eyes" on him, "like fiery tongs." It made him angry, and when he went "to the harlot," he went "to her in rage" and "left her in vain sorrow," feeling guilty for spending "his holy seed in a forbidden darkness where it could only die."

Here, Gabriel takes his anger at his mother out on "the harlot." When he goes to her in a "rage," he is presumably abusive of her. This, too, reflects Gabriel's misogyny. He resents his mother for having power over him and seeks to recover some of that power by abusing another woman. Gabriel feels guilty afterward but not for how he treats the woman. He feels guilty for himself and his "holy seed" because he believes that he is a sinner.

One morning on his way home, Gabriel passed the tree that marked the small **mountain** beyond which was Rachel's cabin. He thought "of all the mornings he had mounted here and passed this tree, caught for a moment between sins committed and sins to be committed," and when he reached out and touched the tree, he cried: "Oh, Lord, have mercy! Oh, Lord, have mercy on me!" He "wept like a little child" and prayed for God to "save" him. There, "in that valley where his mother had told him he would find himself," Gabriel found the Lord. Gabriel always swears that he heard a **song** afterward. "I heard my mother singing," he claims, "like she knew if she just called Him, the Lord would come."

The small mountain is symbolic of the difficult path of the holy life. At the top of the mountain is Rachel's cabin and a righteous life, and at the bottom is the "harlot" and the whiskey. Being holy is an uphill battle—it would be easier for Gabriel to go down the hill, toward sin, as there is much less resistance, but that will not, according to Gabriel, lead to life everlasting. The song Gabriel hears afterward again reflects the importance of music in religion. Even though Rachel wasn't there, Gabriel still claimed to have heard her singing—music and religion are so intimately linked that Gabriel hears it as he is saved.

Thus, began Gabriel's life "as a man." At only twenty-one, he began preaching. He moved to a room in town and married Deborah later that year. After Rachel had died, Deborah "looked after him," cooking his meals and washing his clothes. He "never intended to marry her." To Gabriel, Deborah was Florence's "older" friend and Rachel's "faithful visitor." She was "severe" and "sexless," and placed "on earth to visit the sick."

Gabriel's feelings toward Deborah never change, and if anything, he just grows to hate her more. He continues to think of her as "severe" and "sexless," and he later calls her "black and bony." Gabriel has little respect for his wife, beyond what spiritual and religious benefits she brings him.

There was also Deborah's "legend, her history," which was enough to turn Gabriel off, and she was "wholly unattractive." Combined, these put her beyond "any honorable man's desire." Deborah had only her "shame," and she lived as a "woman mysteriously visited by God, like a terrible example of humility, or like a holy fool." But for Gabriel, "she sustained him most beautifully in his new condition."

Ironically, Gabriel thinks of himself as the "honorable" one here—clearly, Deborah is the only one with any honor. Gabriel holds Deborah's rape against her like a sin she committed, and her shame is surely worsened because men like Gabriel continue to associate her only with her "legend, her history."

Before Gabriel had married Deborah, he was asked to preach at the Twenty-Four Elders Revival Meeting, a summer revival that boasted the best preachers from Florida to Chicago. He preached in the middle of the revival, on the twelfth night, and Deborah went with him to the lodge hall. "Sister Deborah, you sit where I can see you?" he asked. Deborah, as always, sat at the front, and, crying out to praise Jesus, supported Gabriel through the greatest sermon of his career.

Deborah is constantly supporting Gabriel. She cooks and cleans for him, mends his clothes, and cheers him on as he preaches. Still, Gabriel never manages to look past Deborah's rape, and he treats her badly. He looks at her with scorn, refers to her as ugly, and then cheats on her with Esther. Gabriel does not deserve the support Deborah gives him, the book implies, which is further evidence of Deborah's morality and another mark against Gabriel's.

Later that week, Gabriel sat with the other preachers at Sunday dinner, where Deborah was a "serving woman." Gabriel "was not comfortable" with the other preachers. He considered them too "lax" and not like the "holy prophets" they should have been. He even thought of them as "highly paid circus-performers." After Deborah served the food and left the room, one of the preachers looked at her and laughed. "There is a holy woman, all right!" he said. Deborah had been "choked so early on white men's milk," he claimed, that "it remained so sour in her belly" and she would never "find a [n____] who would let her taste his richer, sweeter substance."

Deborah's treatment by the preacher is awful, and the fact that he is preacher and should treat people better only makes it worse. Deborah is made to continually suffer because of her rape. Not only did she suffer through the initial rape itself, but she is forced to keep reliving it through the disgusting and crass comments that the men around her make. The preacher considered her ruined by the white men but not because she was sexually violated; he implies that the white men ruined her for other black men, not that they simply violated her and ruined her sense of autonomy and self.

As the preachers laughed at Deborah's expense, Gabriel grew angry. "That woman," he said, "is my sister in the Lord." The men continued to laugh. "Now, you know," one preacher said, "you ain't fixing to make that woman your wife or nothing like that—so ain't no need to get all worked up and spoil our little gathering." At that moment, Gabriel realized that "the Lord had given him Deborah, to help him stand," so he decided to "raise her up, to release her from that dishonor which was hers in the eyes of men." He *would* marry her—and "their marriage bed would be holy, and their children would continue in the line of the faithful, a royal line."

Gabriel's thoughts about Deborah tell of his sexism and misogyny. God didn't "give" Deborah to him—Baldwin suggests that Deborah is an independent woman who cannot be given to anyone—however, Gabriel sees her as a pet project or something to fix, not because he wants to help her, but because she "helps him to stand." Gabriel assumes that he is superior to Deborah and that he alone, a man, can "raise her up" and "release her dishonor."

Later that night, Gabriel had a dream about the "demons" who haunted his previous life. He saw friends he drank and gambled with and the women "he had known." The women "laughed" and "sighed," and wanted him to come to them, but Gabriel refused. He had another dream that same night of a "cold" and "high" **mountain**, and after a mysterious voice told him to climb, he did. Gabriel climbed higher and higher until he was in a "peaceful field." The voice again spoke. "Follow me," it said. The very next day Gabriel asked Deborah to be his wife, and she wept.

Gabriel's dream about the mountain symbolizes the hard work and sacrifice entailed in remaining holy, but here the mountain also seems to symbolize Gabriel's marriage to Deborah. Marrying Deborah is not easy for Gabriel; he isn't attracted to her in the slightest, and he is repulsed by her rape. Gabriel sees his marriage to Deborah as another reason why he is a good man, but the book suggests that it is actually yet another reason why he is cruel.

Back in the Harlem church, the silence is broken as Elisha cries out and falls backward onto **the threshing-floor**, "under the power of the Lord." Gabriel opens his eyes, afraid that the sound is coming from John. Gabriel has two sons and neither are at the church tonight. One had been killed years ago in Chicago, and the other, Roy, is still at home recovering from being slashed. "Only the son of the bondwoman stands where the rightful heir should stand," Gabriel thinks.

The threshing-floor symbolizes judgement in the novel. Here, when Elisha goes to the threshing-floor and falls under the power of the Lord, he has been judged and found to be righteous. Gabriel is afraid the sound is coming from John because he doesn't want John to be saved before his real son, Roy, is saved. This is further proof of Gabriel's despicable character.

As Elisha cries out, Gabriel thinks of his sons. Roy had cursed him when he called him a bastard, and Esther, the mother of Gabriel's first son, Royal, had cursed him as well. This curse had "devoured" Royal—he was "begotten in sin, and he had perished in sin"—and Gabriel suddenly realizes that Roy "might be cursed for the sin of his mother, [Elizabeth,] whose sin had never been truly repented." John, the "living proof" of Elizabeth's sin, "stood between her soul and God," like an "interloper among the saints."

Gabriel repeatedly blames women for his troubles in life. Esther didn't really curse him or Royal; Esther and Royal are both dead not because of a curse, but in large part because of Gabriel's actions. Had he accepted them and not judged them, perhaps they would both be alive still. Furthermore, Roy isn't cursed by Elizabeth's choices either. If Roy is cursed, it is by Gabriel's abuse.

Gabriel once asked Elizabeth if she had "truly repented." She said she had, but Gabriel isn't so sure. "Would you do it again?" he asked her. "I know you ain't asking me to say I'm sorry I brought Johnny in the world. Is you?" She asked. Elizabeth refused to apologize for her son. "And listen, Gabriel. I ain't going to let you *make* me sorry." At the time, she was pregnant with Sarah, and they had already had Roy. "We is got *two* children," Elizabeth had said, "and soon we's going to have *three*; and I ain't going to make no difference amongst them and you ain't going to make none either."

Elizabeth only believes her relationship with Richard and the birth of John to be sinful because Gabriel keeps telling her it is. He will never treat John like his own child (not that he treats his own much better), and this scenario is loosely based on Baldwin's own life growing up. He, too, was raised by his stepfather, who was a preacher, and he treated Baldwin badly compared to his biological children as well.

Gabriel begins to think again of Esther. She is forever "associated in his mind with flame" and "the eternal fires of Hell." She worked for the same white family Gabriel worked for, and she and her "sinful" parents never went to church. Gabriel always saw Esther with a different man, and concerned for her soul, he invited her to church to watch him preach.

Gabriel believes Esther and her parents to be sinners simply because they don't go to church, and Baldwin implies that this isn't an adequate measure of morality. Gabriel has no proof that Esther is a bad person or promiscuous; he simply assumes she is because she talks to men and doesn't go to church. This speaks more to Gabriel's closemindedness than it does to Esther's morality.

Esther came to church that night, but she was late. She sat near the back with her mother and wore a big blue hat and dark red dress. As Gabriel preached, he watched both Esther and Deborah, and he realized how "black," "bony," and "wholly undesirable" his wife was, and he "hated her." As Gabriel preached, he asked the congregation if there was a soul among them who wanted to "say No to Satan and give their life to the Lord," but Esther did not stand. She left immediately after his sermon, while the saints were still singing.

Esther's ostentatious outfit—a big blue hat and red dress—identify her as an outsider, and her red dress even suggests sin and the fires of Hell. Gabriel is hoping that Esther will stand up and give her life to the Lord so that he can stop feeling guilty about being attracted to a sinner. Gabriel isn't interested in saving Esther but in saving himself.

Soon after, Gabriel dropped the white people he worked for off to visit relatives for a few days, and when he returned to lock up their house, Esther was waiting on the front porch. She had been drinking whiskey, and Gabriel was "excited" to see her. He offered to walk her home as she accepted. As Gabriel went to secure the doors and windows, Esther waited for him in the kitchen, helping herself to more of the boss's whiskey.

Gabriel assumes that Esther's drinking is further proof her sinfulness, yet he is still "excited" to see her, which makes him appear hypocritical. The fact that the whiskey doesn't belong to Esther is another strike against her. Not only is she drinking, she is stealing the whiskey from her boss.

"Girl," Gabriel said finding Esther drinking in the kitchen, "don't you believe in God? God don't lie—and He says, plain as I'm talking to you, the soul that sinneth, it shall *die*." Esther laughed. She is a "grown woman," she said, and "ain't fixing to change." She smiled at Gabriel. "Reverend," she said. "I ain't done nothing that I'm ashamed of, and I hope I *don't* do nothing I'm ashamed of, ever." When she said the word "Reverend," Gabriel "wanted to strike her."

Gabriel directly calls Esther a sinner here. She doesn't consider her drinking a sin, but she eludes to the fact that Gabriel does (because he is ashamed of his own history with drinking). When she calls him "Reverend," it reminds Gabriel of the vow he has taken to the Lord and he resents it, so he wants to "strike" Esther. Gabriel's anger is misplaced, and it also reflects his misogyny—everything is a woman's fault.

"*Yes*, you know," Gabriel said as he approached Esther, "why I'm all the time worrying about you—why I'm all the time miserable when I look at you." He ran his hands along her body and breasts. "*You* know," he said. And just like that, Gabriel "had fallen." Esther touched him as well, and loosened his collar, which "threatened to choke him," and soon they were on the floor, "locked together."

Gabriel doesn't ask for Esther's permission before touching her, he simply does it. This suggests that Gabriel doesn't believe he needs her permission to approach her sexually, since, as Deborah says, men believe women are only to fill their own wicked desires. Gabriel's collar, presumably a clerical collar, is a symbol of his religion and vows, and as he sins, the collar "chokes" him.

Gabriel's affair with Esther lasted a mere nine days, and he isn't sure exactly when Royal was conceived during that time. His guilt soon consumed him, and he refused to continue seeing her. It was "over." Gabriel was "bruised and frightened," and he "had lost the respect of Esther forever." He prayed to God for forgiveness and the strength to never "fall" again. But Gabriel couldn't help but think of all the women who "wanted him still," and he tried to "wear out his visions" in his "marriage bed," where he "struggled to awaken Deborah." Gabriel's contempt for his wife grew by the day.

This passage provides further proof of Gabriel's misogyny: he precipitates the affair with Esther, but then he *loses respect for* her. *Gabriel's misogyny continues with Deborah. He tries to forget Esther by having sex with Deborah but isn't attracted to her, meaning she isn't beautiful enough for him, so he hates her.*

"Gabriel," Esther said one day at work. "I going to have a baby." Gabriel was shocked. Esther "was going to have his baby—*his* baby?" he thought. Esther was "no better than a harlot," and it was in her "womb" that the "seed of the prophet would be nourished." Gabriel had asked how she was so sure that it was his baby. "I ain't gone with so many men that I'm subject to get my mind confused," she replied. "You know I got a wife to think about," Gabriel said. Esther had hoped that since he "forgot about [Deborah] once," he would be able to "forget her twice."

Again, Gabriel assumes Esther is promiscuous and has slept with many men. His low opinion of her reflects his low opinion of women in general, and he immediately decides that her womb is not fit to carry his "see." Esther doesn't love Gabriel, but she still hopes he will leave Deborah for her. She knows that society will shun her if she gives birth out of wedlock, and she wants to avoid this fate.

Esther told Gabriel that Deborah would never "make him happy," and "she ain't never going to have no children," she added. "I ain't never told you I wanted to leave my wife," Gabriel said. "It's your baby," Esther told him, "and ain't no way in the world to get around *that*." Gabriel agreed. He was "tempted" and "fell," and he isn't the first man to fall to "a wicked woman," he told her. "You be careful how you talk to me," Esther answered, "I ain't the first girl's been ruined by a holy man, neither." She threatened to tell Deborah and Gabriel's congregation about the baby and their affair.

Presumably, Deborah's rape has also robbed her of the ability to have children, and she dies "barren." This makes her attack seem worse, if that is even possible. Again, Gabriel is misogynistic and refuses to take any responsibility when there is a woman available to blame. By referring to himself as "a man" who fell "to a wicked woman," Gabriel implies that he is the victim in their relationship, not Deborah, and that he deserves sympathy and she deserves what she gets—to be shunned and die alone miles away from her home and family.

"I can't marry you," Gabriel told Esther, "you know that. Now, what you want me to do?" Esther did know that Gabriel wouldn't marry her. She knew she was "just for the night, for the dark," where no one would know Gabriel was getting his "holy self all dirtied up" with a "whore." She didn't want him either. She wanted to go North and have her baby away from him and his church. She needed only money. "I ain't got no *money*," Gabriel said. "Well," Esther told him, "you damn well better find some."

Again, Gabriel assumes that Esther is a sinner simply because he thinks she's a "whore." There is no evidence that Esther is a bad person, and her worst offense is helping herself to whiskey that didn't belong to her. There is, however, plenty of evidence that Gabriel is a sinner, which makes him and his religion hypocritical.

That night, Gabriel took the money Deborah had been saving since they were married. He sent Esther to Chicago and took a preaching assignment in another state for three months. When he came home, he replaced the money, and tried to "begin his life again." One day, he received a letter from Esther from Chicago. She said she had made a "mistake" messing around with him, and she was "paying for it." Gabriel would pay one day too, she said. "I ain't holy like you are," Esther wrote, "but I know right from wrong." She was going to raise her son to "be a man," she said, and if he grows up to do nothing but drink "moonshine all his natural days he be a better man than his Daddy."

Here, Gabriel sins to coverup his sin. He cheats on Deborah with Esther, and then he steals from Deborah to try to fix the trouble that came from his affair. Deborah is doubly cheated, and it is later revealed that she knew all along. Esther's letter in which she claims she doesn't need religion to know right from wrong seems to be one of Baldwin's primary arguments. Gabriel is the definite sinner in this situation, yet it is Esther who is made to pay. This again reflects the hypocrisy of religion as well as the misogyny present in society.

That summer, Gabriel again preached out of town. He couldn't stand being at home with Deborah, going to his own church every day. As he preached at distant churches, he saw "in this wandering, how far his people had wandered from God." They worshipped "idols of gold and silver," and their **music** was not of saints but of "gin-heavy dance halls."

Gabriel's "wandering" is another reference to Sister Tharpe's gospel song, and through it, Baldwin seems to imply that Gabriel has wandered very far from God. Worshipping gold and dancing in gin joints pales in comparison to Gabriel's sins.

When Gabriel returned that winter, "Esther came home too," in a wooden box with "her living son." Esther's parents took to raising the boy, who was named Royal, and Gabriel "watched his son grow up, a stranger to his father and a stranger to God." After Royal came to live with his grandparents, Deborah became "friendly" with them and frequently bought Gabriel news of the young boy's life.

Deborah becomes friendly with Royal's people because she knows that he is Gabriel's son. Deborah is a good woman, and she later tells Gabriel that she would have raised Royal after Esther's death. Deborah's interest in Royal's life is proof that she cares and that her words aren't empty like Gabriel's.

"I wonder," Deborah said to Gabriel one day, "why [Esther] called him Royal? You reckon that his daddy's name?" Gabriel pretended not to know, but he did. He had told Esther that he wanted to name his first son Royal, "because the line of the faithful was a royal line—his son would be a royal child." Esther had "mocked him" by naming their son Royal. "She had died, then," he knew, "hating him," and "she had carried into eternity a curse on him and his."

Since Gabriel told Esther about his desire to name his first son Royal, it is likely that he told Deborah—his wife—as well. When she asks Gabriel why he thinks Esther named her baby Royal, she probably already knows the answer. Gabriel's desire to name his first son Royal seems like common knowledge—he names his next son Royal ("Roy") too—and thus it seems that Deborah is trying to tell him that she knows.

Meanwhile, in the Harlem church, John tries to pray. He can hear the other saints praying but doesn't know where to start. "Salvation is real," a mysterious voice says. "God is real. Death may come soon or late, why do you hesitate?" John knows that if he prays and is saved, Gabriel will "no longer be is father," and John will instead be "the son of his Heavenly Father, the King." Then, John and Gabriel will "be equals," and Gabriel will "not beat him any more, or despise him any more, or mock him any more." But John doesn't want this; he wants his father to "*die!*" In John's view, death and "Hell, everlasting" is the only punishment fit for Gabriel.

Gabriel hears a mysterious voice the morning he is saved near the tree, and John is hearing a voice as well. Here, the voice seems to encourage him and keep him on the holy path, but it later tells him to leave the church and go out into the world, presumably to sin, so it is difficult to say who, or what, the mysterious voice is. If it is God, surely it wouldn't tempt John to sin. Ironically, Gabriel isn't technically John's father now, even before he is saved. Baldwin seems to suggest that John doesn't need religion to be free of Gabriel.

The morning that Gabriel learned of Royal's death, Deborah was sick in bed as she often was. "I hear some mighty bad news today," Deborah had told him. Royal had gone off to Chicago and "some of them northern [n____s]" had "stabbed him in the throat." Gabriel immediately broke down and wept. "Gabriel…that Royal…he were your flesh and blood, weren't he?" Gabriel admitted it, and Deborah finally told him she knew all about his affair with Esther and Royal's birth.

Even Deborah uses derogatory language here. She implies that the black men living in the North aren't as good as those in the South, and as such, she refers to them using a racial slur.

"I asked my God to forgive me," Gabriel told Deborah. "But I didn't want no harlot's son." Deborah was quiet. "Esther weren't no harlot," she said. Deborah told Gabriel that she would have "raised [Royal] like [her] own," and maybe he would still be living. "Honey," Deborah said, "you better pray God to forgive you. You better not let go until He make *know* you been forgiven." As Deborah spoke, the sky opened, and it began to rain. Gabriel looked to the sky. "Listen," he said. "God is talking."

Deborah implies here that Gabriel couldn't possibly be forgiven for what he has done. Even Gabriel says he asked for forgiveness, and now "God is talking" because Gabriel is not forgiven, and deep down he knows it.

Inside the Temple of the Fire Baptized, Gabriel rises with the rest of the congregation and stands over Elisha on **the threshing-floor**. John, too, rises and joins them. Suddenly, Elisha begins "to speak in a tongue of fire, under the power of the Holy Ghost." Gabriel looks to John, who has the "eyes of Satan," and stares "in wrath and horror at Elizabeth's presumptuous bastard boy." Gabriel wants to "strike him," but instead he silently mouths: "Kneel down." John turns and kneels before the alter.

Here, Gabriel orders John to the altar; he doesn't go of his own accord. Although John is later taken by the Lord, this passage makes it clear that he is initially resistant to go. This suggests that without Gabriel, perhaps John would not have gone to the threshing-floor. Gabriel believes that John is inherently evil and must repent because he is a "bastard," which Baldwin implies is ridiculous.

PART 2: THE PRAYERS OF THE SAINTS: ELIZABETH'S PRAYER

As Elisha speaks in tongues, Elizabeth feels that "the Lord is speaking to her," and she "humbles herself to listen." This does not fill her with joy but with "fear" of "what displeasure" or "trials yet to be endured might issue from His mouth." Elisha stops speaking and goes to the piano, where he begins to play. Elizabeth can hear others "weeping," but she isn't sure who is crying. The **song** the congregation begins to sing had been Elizabeth's aunt's favorite. "*The consecrated cross I'll bear / Till death shall set me free*," the church sings.

Elizabeth's religion doesn't fill her with comfort and joy but with "fear" and "displeasure," which is another critique of Christianity. Here, religion is the source, or rather the excuse, for Elizabeth's "trials" (i.e., slavery and racism), and she worries what he will hand out next. This takes the blame and responsibility of slavery and racism away from white America where it belongs, and places it with God, where it can never be righted or atoned.

If Elizabeth's aunt is still alive, Elizabeth thinks, she must be very old by now. She never knew of Elizabeth's "shame," and Elizabeth had not told her of John until long after she had already married Gabriel. Her aunt had been "second in a series of disasters that had ended Elizabeth's childhood." Elizabeth's mother had died when Elizabeth was only eight years old; however, Elizabeth did not initially think of her death as a "disaster."

The fact that Elizabeth considers John's birth to be her "shame" is very telling of her sexist and misogynistic society. John is an innocent child, certainly not a sin in and of himself, and this "shame" is Elizabeth's burden alone. Even if Richard had lived, it would not be his *"shame," and as a result, it is Elizabeth's cross to bear, so to speak.*

Elizabeth's mother "had been very fair, and beautiful." Her health was always poor, and Elizabeth "scarcely" knew and "never loved her." The woman "wept very easily," and "smelled like stale milk." She always made Elizabeth "think of milk" when she held her in her arms, which didn't happen very often. Elizabeth was always "much darker than her mother and not nearly, of course, so beautiful." Thus, she always referred to Elizabeth as an "unnatural child."

Baldwin doesn't explicitly say that Elizabeth's mother was white, but this passage reveals it to be a possibility. At the very least, her complexion is very light (which would make it easier for her to "pass" for white during Jim Crow) which she believes makes her superior. Elizabeth's mother believes blackness to be "unnatural," and she shows Elizabeth this outright.

Elizabeth's father was "different." He was "young, and handsome, and kind, and generous," and Elizabeth was "the apple of his eye." He was "dark, like Elizabeth, and gentle, and proud." He never learned of Elizabeth's disgrace either. She thinks of him now as she **sings**—about how much he would love John and how much John is like him.

Here, music has the power not only to connect Elizabeth to God but to the joys of her past. Her father was a good man—he treated Elizabeth well and was proud of his identity as a black man—and the music is a means for her to experience this again.

Elizabeth's father had been the one to teach Elizabeth never to let the world see her cry and to "never ask for mercy." He taught her that it is okay to die, but "never to let oneself be beaten." He had told Elizabeth this the last time she saw him, before she was sent to Maryland to live with her aunt.

Elizabeth's father's lessons are a product of his own connection with racism and slavery. While Elizabeth's father would not have been a slave, his parents more than likely were, and his lessons reflect their oppressive plight.

After Elizabeth's mother died, Elizabeth's aunt insisted Elizabeth move in with her. She said Elizabeth's father was not a "fit person to raise a child." He ran a "house," where "wicked people often came," and Elizabeth's aunt thought his lifestyle was inappropriate. So, Elizabeth's life "changed. Her mother was dead, her father banished, and she lived in the shadow of her aunt."

Presumably, Elizabeth's father runs a whorehouse, or brothel, which her aunt believes makes him immoral. There is no mention of how he treats the women under his employ, but since he is described as "kind and generous," it is possible that he treats them well. Elizabeth's aunt assumes that Elizabeth's father is a sinner because of his job's connection to sex, but Baldwin implies that this isn't true. Here, the aunt appears as the sinner for falsely judging him and taking Elizabeth away from a father who loves her.

Elizabeth never "judged her father," and "she did not accuse him." She loved him, and while it was clear that her aunt had loved her mother, she didn't love Elizabeth. She was cruel to Elizabeth and treated her badly. "You little miss great-I-am," her aunt would say, "you better watch your step, you hear me? You go walking around with your nose in the air, the Lord's going to let you fall right on down to the bottom of the ground. *You* mark my words. You'll *see*."

Like Gabriel, Elizabeth's aunt represents righteousness and piety, yet she is completely awful in practice. Elizabeth has done nothing to deserve her verbal abuse. It seems as if the right thing to do would be to be kind to Elizabeth—her mother has just died and her father has been banished—but her aunt is instead cruel, like, Baldwin argues, religion itself.

As the church sings the nostalgic **hymn**, Elizabeth thinks of Richard. He had been the one to take Elizabeth to the North. He had arrived in Maryland suddenly in 1919 and worked at a local grocery store where Elizabeth and her aunt shopped. He "was very thin, and beautiful, and nervous—*high strung*," Elizabeth had thought. He was "sullen and only barely polite" to the customers, and Elizabeth noticed him immediately.

*The year 1919 is known historically as the Red Summer due to the increase in violence against black Americans during that time. The Red Summer saw a historic number of lynchings and race riots, and it drove, Richard included, thousands of black people to the North, where it was assumed to be safer. By mentioning the year 1919, Baldwin also draws on the violence and fear associated with that time. Richard is "nervous" because he has, more than likely, witness this violence firsthand, and this is reflected in Baldwin's use of the term "*high strung*," which is in italics no less. Baldwin wants the reader to stop and ruminate on the senseless and hateful lynchings of 1919.*

Once, Elizabeth had gone into the store without her aunt, and Richard had flirted with her. He later asked her if she still remembered that day. Of course, she did, she had told him. "Well, you was mighty pretty," he said. "You was reading a book," she said. "What book was it, Richard?" He shrugged and smiled. "Oh, I don't remember," he said. "Just a book."

Richard can't remember what book he was reading because he is always reading a book. Richard seeks to gain some sense of control and power through knowledge. His racist society has stripped him of all power because he is black, and he tries to tip the scale back with the power of his mind.

Richard hated the South and planned on going to New York, and he wanted Elizabeth to come with him so they could get married. Elizabeth agreed, and she told her aunt she would be moving to New York to live with Madame Williams, a "respectable female relative" in the city, to "take advantage of the greater opportunities the North offered colored people." She could study at better schools or get a better job there.

While the North is certainly segregated, Jim Crow laws existed mostly in the South, and if Elizabeth moves North, she will have a greater choice of schools and jobs.

In the winter of 1920, Elizabeth moved to "an ugly back room in Harlem" in Madame William's home, where the old woman burned incense and held "spiritualist séances" each Saturday night. Elizabeth worked as a maid in the same hotel where Richard worked the elevator. They had little money, and their marriage "was planned for a future that grew ever more remote." This was a problem for Elizabeth. Back in Maryland, under the watchful eye of her aunt, Elizabeth had guarded her "pearl with price," but in the city where no one cared what she did, her "pearl" was more difficult to hold on to.

The couple's jobs in New York reflect the traditional gender roles of the time: Elizabeth works as a maid (as she is expected, as a woman, to clean and keep house), and Richard works as the elevator operator, which is technical and mechanical and therefore manly. Furthermore, both Elizabeth and Richard work in a position of service to white people, which again reflects their racist society. Society believes that black people should serve white people, and their jobs support this belief.

Elizabeth often wondered back then if she was no better than the women in her father's "house," and the North was difficult for other reasons as well. The North was just like the South; the North "promised more," but "it did not give," and what it did give "with one hand, it "took back with the other." But she never thought of leaving Richard. She had loved him. They had "been very happy together," and "he had been very good to her." Elizabeth was never—not even now sitting in the Harlem church—"truly sorry" for her relationship with Richard. "Where, then, was her repentance?" she thought.

Because Elizabeth has been raised to believe sex is a sin and that women who have sex are wicked, she feels expected to repent for her actions. However, she loved Richard deeply, and her repentance is empty.

Elizabeth and Richard often went to museums, and she had been shocked the first time he suggested it. "Sure, they let [n____s] in," he had said. "Ain't we got to be educated, too—to live with the motherfuckers?" Richard was smart, and he was always reading, although he had never gone to school. "I just decided me one day that I was going to get to know everything them white bastards knew, and I was going to get to know it better than them, so could no with son-of-a-bitch *nowhere* never talk *me* down, and never make me feel like *I* was dirt," he had said.

In the South, Elizabeth and Richard would not have been allowed in museums. Racial stereotypes of the time considered black Americans stupid and unable to appreciate, or produce, art. This is evidence of America's institutionalized racism; at one point, it was illegal for black people in America to even be able to read. Then, society turned around and condemned black people for being illiterate and claimed they weren't smart. Richard and Elizabeth's trip to the museum, while it may seem small, represents major progress, as does Baldwin's writing of this book. What is taken for granted now was, not so long ago, completely forbidden to black Americans.

One night, after spending the entire evening together, Richard left Elizabeth at Madame Williams's and went to catch the subway home. He was planning on coming over the next day to meet Madame Williams for the first time, but he never showed. He didn't show up for work on Monday, and when Elizabeth went to the room he was renting to find him, she found the police instead. "He's in jail, honey," the police officer said. "For robbing a white man's store, black girl."

The police officers are completely racist and disrespectful. They call Elizabeth "Honey," which immediately places them as men in a position of authority over her, and then they claim Richard is in jail for robbing a "white man's store." This implies the situation would be much different if he had robbed a black man instead. Then, they refer to her as "black girl," again trying to strip her of power by reminding Elizabeth that she is both black and a woman.

The police officers forced Elizabeth down to the police station where "she some how got past their brutal laughter." The officers questioned her, making her feel uncomfortable. "What was [Richard] doing with you, girl, until two o'clock in the morning?" one officer asked. "Next time you feel like that, girl, you come by here and talk to *me*."

This moment is a complete violation of Elizabeth's civil rights, but the police don't seem to care. They sexually harass her and blatantly proposition her for sex, which shows not only their power over her as a person of color, but their complete disrespect for women in general.

Elizabeth was finally allowed to see Richard the next day in the jail where he was being held. He had been appointed a lawyer, and he would go to trial in a week. Elizabeth "wept" when she saw him. He had been "beaten" and "could hardly walk." He told her that after he left her that night, he had gone to the subway platform, when three other black men ran up to him, pursued by two white men. Richard knew immediately that their trouble "was now his trouble," as the white men would "make no distinction between" him and the other black men.

Richard's assault while in police custody is further proof of their racist society, and the fact that Richard is innocent makes this even worse. Richard is accused simply because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and since he is black, the police will not listen to him.

Richard was arrested along with the other three black men for robbery, and he told the police at the station that he was not involved. The other black men "despairingly" corroborated his story, but when the white store owner came to identify the men who robbed his store, he identified Richard right along with the other three men. "You black bastards," the store owner said, "you're all the same."

Racist stereotypes say all black men are dangerous criminals, so the store owner "makes no distinction" between the black men who are actually criminal, and Richard, a black man who was simply waiting for a train. The store owner is a small-scale representation of the racist assumptions of broader society.

Elizabeth had known for some time that she was pregnant, but she didn't want to worry Richard while he was in jail and could do nothing about it. She "hated" New York, all of the "white city and the white world." She couldn't "think of one decent white person in the whole world," and she wanted God to make them know that "black boys and black girls, whom they treated with such condescension, such disdain, and such good humor, had hearts like human beings, too, more human hearts than theirs."

Like her sexist society, Elizabeth thinks her pregnancy is her *burden, not Richard's. Whether he feels this way is never revealed, but she doesn't tell him because of it, and she is left feeling responsible after he commits suicide. She feels that had she told him, he would not have killed himself, which only increases her emotional burden and oppression as a woman.*

Richard was eventually released. The jury found insufficient evidence to convict him, and "the courtroom seemed to feel, with some complacency and some disappointment," that Richard had been "lucky" to "be let off so easily." When he returned home, he fell to his bed and wept, and Elizabeth thought it still a bad time to tell him about the baby. That night, Richard slit his wrists with a razor, and his lifeless body was found the next day by his landlady.

The court wants *Richard to be guilty so they can throw him in jail, where they seem to believe all black men belong. Richard isn't "lucky," and he isn't "let off easy." Their racist assumptions have ruined his life and broken his spirt, and he commits suicide because of it.*

Elizabeth's thoughts are interrupted by a new **song** and singing in the church. She continues her prayer, but she knows it is "in vain." What is "coming will surely come," Elizabeth thinks to herself. "Nothing can stop it." She sometimes thinks that perhaps it would have been better to have given John up for adoption, so that he would have had a better chance at a father who loved him. Gabriel had promised to "love her nameless son as though he were his own flesh," but he does not. Elizabeth feels that Gabriel only tolerates her because she is the mother of his biological son, Roy.

Here, Gabriel is again the immoral one. He makes a promise that he has no intention of keeping, and he plays favorites with innocent children and negatively affects their childhood. Ironically, it is Elizabeth who thinks her prayers for redemption are in vain, when it is really Gabriel who has sinned so severely that forgiveness seems difficult if not impossible.

Elizabeth first met Gabriel through Florence when John was only six months old. Elizabeth and John were living alone in a furnished room, and she was working the nightshift cleaning offices on Wall Street with Florence. Florence had asked Elizabeth out for coffee one morning after work, and she accepted. Elizabeth was "pretending in those days to be a young widow," and she even wore a wedding ring. Florence talked that first morning mostly about herself, about "how badly people treated her," and how her husband, who was now dead, "had adored her."

Elizabeth goes to a lot of trouble to ensure her sexist society doesn't shun her. She even wears a fake wedding ring to make herself more believable. Florence, too, goes to some trouble, as she lies by omission about her history with Frank. She says nothing of her divorce and implies that he died while they were still married. No doubt Frank "adored" Florence, but the story goes a lot deeper than that, and she fears society will scorn her if she admits to being a divorced woman, not a widow.

One afternoon, Elizabeth took John to Florence's house for a visit, and he instantly took to the older woman. "He likes you," Elizabeth said as John cooed at Florence and grabbed for her jewelry. "Any child of Elizabeth's" Florence had said, "must be a wonderful child." Florence told Elizabeth that she had just received a letter from her bother, Gabriel. His wife had recently died, and he planned to move North. Florence hadn't seen in him in over twenty years. "I'm sorry he's coming," Florence said. "I didn't look to see him no more in this world—or in the next one, neither."

Florence's comment that John "must be a wonderful child" underscores the cruelty of the sexist assumptions of their society. John is an innocent baby and couldn't possibly be tainted or inherently sinful simply because he was born out of wedlock. The fact that Florence doesn't intend to see Gabriel in the next life suggests that one of them is going to hell and the other to heaven—and while it is assumed that Gabriel is saved because he is a preacher, both Florence and Baldwin seem to believe otherwise.

Florence told Elizabeth that Gabriel was "some kind of preacher," but when they were younger, he did nothing but "chase after women." Elizabeth commented that perhaps the Lord had changed him. "I done heard [that] said often enough," Florence said, "but I got yet to see it." Elizabeth grew quiet. "I was just thinking about this boy here," Elizabeth said about baby John, "what's going to happen to him, how I'm going raise him, in this awful city all by myself." Florence sighed. "I don't believe a [n____'s] been born that knows how to treat a woman right. You got time, honey, so *take* your time."

Florence again suggests that Gabriel's sins are beyond the help of God and religion. His time as a preacher does not forgive or excuse the pain he has caused others, and it does not afford him a free pass into eternal life. This also reflects Florence's hatred of men. As an independent woman, she believes Elizabeth is better off without a man, regardless of what society says.

Suddenly, Elizabeth broke down and cried. "You see this wedding ring?" she asked Florence. "Well, I bought this ring myself. [John] ain't got no daddy." Florence immediately comforted her. "You poor thing," she said, "you *is* had a time, ain't you?" Florence continued. "Look like ain't no woman born what don't get walked over by some no-count man." It wasn't like that, Elizabeth told her. Richard had "*died*." Florence moved to comfort her again. "The menfolk, they die," Florence said, "and it's over for them, but we women, we have to keep on living and try to forget what they done to us."

Here, Florence suggests that women must carry both their own burdens and man's burden as well. This too reflects their sexist society, as men are not expected to take responsibility as long as it can be passed along to a woman.

Elizabeth met Gabriel a few weeks later. She again took John to Florence's house, and on the way into her building, John began to wriggle and dance to sound of **blues music** coming from the home of a nearby "harlot." "You's a [n____], all right," Elizabeth said to John. Inside, Florence introduced Elizabeth and John to Gabriel. Gabriel took the baby, who continued to dance to the audible music, in his arms. "Got a man in the Bible, son, who liked music, too," Gabriel said to John. "He used to play on his harp before the king, and he got to dancing one day before the Lord. You reckon you going to dance for the Lord one of these days?"

Again, there is a connection between the blues and sin, and sex specifically, as the music is coming from a harlot's house. Elizabeth's comment that John's obvious preference for the music makes him a "[n____]" simultaneously assumes that John is no good because he is black, and that he has some inherent pull to sex and sin. Gabriel's comment to John is one of his only tender moments, but this is fleeting and doesn't happen again.

Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth sat and visited, while John fell asleep to the sound of the **blues**. From that moment on, Elizabeth, "who had descended with such joy and pain, had begun her upward climb—upward, with her baby, on the steep, steep side of the **mountain**."

Baldwin's mention of a mountain refers to Elizabeth's uphill climb to salvation and redemption. Again, when John falls asleep to the blues, this suggests that he is somehow evil, since he finds the sinful music soothing.

Florence "did not approve" of Elizabeth's relationship with Gabriel, and she was vocal of this from the start, but she never said more than simply that she did not approve. "Sister," Gabriel asked Elizabeth one day, "don't you reckon you ought to give your heart to the Lord?" She told him that she should, and he told her that he believed it to be "His will" that they "be man and wife." He promised to "honor" her if she would have him. "And I'll love your son, your little boy," Gabriel said of John, "just like he was my own. […] I swear this before God, because He done give me back something I thought was lost."

Again, Gabriel does not keep his promise to Elizabeth or John, and Baldwin implies that this is a sin as well. He doesn't truly want to help Elizabeth and John but considers them a way for him to make up for the sins he committed with Esther and Royal. Furthermore, when Gabriel tells Elizabeth that it is God's will that they marry, this, in a way, makes it nearly impossible for Elizabeth to say no. It is unlikely that she would have said no, especially in light of Gabriel's promise, but the implication that God has willed it so suggests that Elizabeth doesn't have a choice in the matter.

PART 3: THE THRESHING-FLOOR

Without knowing how, John finds himself on **the threshing-floor**. He feels "like a rock," or like "something that has no power of itself, any more, to turn." Deep inside John, "something moves" as if he is "possessed." It begins to fill him "with an anguish" that he has "never imagined" and can't "endure. He feels broken— "cracked" in half—but he does not feel the "wound," only "the agony" and "fear."

Gabriel has already ordered John to kneel before the threshing-floor, but a mysterious power seems to pull him closer. John is falling to the "valley" Rachel told Gabriel about, where no one and nothing can save him but the Lord.

A mysterious voice tells John "to rise" and "leave this temple and go out into the world," and while he wants to go, he can't move. "Something" is happening to John. He can't move his arms or legs to rise from **the threshing-floor**, and he begins to scream. The voice again tells him to get up off the "filthy floor" if he doesn't "want to become like all the other [n____s]." John tries again, but the "darkness" has "no beginning, and no end." John is falling and is "going down."

Again, the voice seems to tempt John here, or at least test his faith. If he goes outside where sin is abundant, there is a chance he will falter. But John is too deep in the valley to rise now. The voice also insults him and assumes he is "filthy" because he is black. This voice surely does not sound like God, but perhaps is the Devil, tempting John to stray from the light.

"Set thin house in order," John hears Gabriel say, "for thou shalt die and not live." John again hears the mysterious voice. "Get up, John," it says. "Get up, boy. Don't let him keep you here. You got everything your daddy got." Gabriel looks to John, and John "screams." Gabriel's eyes "strip him naked," and "hating" what he sees, John again begins to fall.

John seems to be hallucinating Gabriel's favorite saying, which Gabriel seems to say to everyone. This suggests that it is Gabriel, not others, who needs to get his house in order. The threshing-floor is symbolic of judgement in the novel, and as John lays there, he feels naked and exposed.

John doesn't know where he is. There is only "silence" and a "faint trembling far beneath him." He thinks perhaps it is "the fires of Hell" he is hearing, and then he hears Gabriel's voice. "I'm going to beat sin out of him. I'm going to beat it out." John knows he has sinned. Once, in their "dirty bathroom," when Gabriel was in the tub and asked John to wash his back, John had "looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, on his father's hideous nakedness." John wonders if he lay here now, unable to rise, because looking unto his father had caused him to be "cursed."

The Old Testament claims Noah's son Ham was cursed for looking at his father's naked body, which resulted in Ham's sons to be cursed for all eternity and serve as slaves. Indeed, black slaves were often referred to as the sons of Ham, which was meant to justify their existence as slaves. However, the book makes it clear that generations of abuse and exploitation cannot be justified with biblical interpretation and believing it does only perpetuates the racism that made black people slaves in the first place.

"All [n____s] have been cursed," the mysterious voice says, "all [n____s] have come from this most undutiful of Noah's sons." John wonders if a curse can "come down so many ages." Does a curse "live in time," he questions, "or in the moment?" With Gabriel standing over him on **the threshing-floor**, John knows that a curse is "renewed from moment to moment, from father to son. Time is indifferent, like snow and ice; but the heart, crazed wanderer in the driving waste, carries the curse forever."

It is not God who is judging John, Baldwin implies, but Gabriel, and since Baldwin has already established that Gabriel is a terrible human being, his opinion should matter little. John's understanding of "curses" reveals them for what they are—the bigoted and biased assumptions of a limited few kept alive by hatred and cruelty, not punishment passed along by God.

"John," says Gabriel, "come with me." He leads John down a "narrow, narrow" street. The street is abandoned, and John is "frightened." He looks to the buildings and knows they are "not for him—not today—*no, nor tomorrow, neither*!" A strange woman comes out of nowhere and passes them. "You mighty proud, ain't you," Gabriel says, "to be the Devil's son?" Gabriel motions toward the woman. "You see that? That's sin. That's what the Devil's son runs after," he says. "Whose son are you?" John asks, and Gabriel slaps him.

John is again hallucinating, and Gabriel takes him to their segregated streets. In this way, Baldwin directly points at religion as a source—or at least a justification—of racism, bigotry, and sexism. When John asks Gabriel "whose son are you" he is, he implies that since Gabriel was not born of an immaculate conception, his own birth involves sex and therefore, to some extent, sin.

"I seen it. I seen it," John says as he runs from Gabriel. "And I *heard* you—all the nighttime long. I know what you do in the dark, black man, when you think the Devil's son's asleep. [...] I ain't the Devil's son for nothing." Gabriel stares as his son, not speaking. "And I hate you," John says. "I seen under the robe, I seen you!" Gabriel raises his hand to strike him, and just like that, there is "silence" again, and Gabriel is "gone."

Here, John implies that (nearly) everyone has sex, which begs the question why, exactly, it is considered so sinful. Literally everyone exists because someone had sex, and this is implied when John says, "I seen you!" This also implies that John sees Gabriel for who he truly is—a complete and total sinner.

John tries to run, but he can't, and he begins to call out for help. "Oh, Lord, have mercy on me," he cries. "Yes," the mysterious voice says, "go through. Go through." John tries again to move but is thwarted by the darkness. "Call on Him," the voice says. "Call on Him. Ask Him to take you through." It occurs to John that there must be "light somewhere, and life, and joy," and he begins to cry again. "Oh, Lord, have mercy. Have mercy, Lord."

The light, of course, is symbolic of God, who is the only one who can lift John from the darkness. This suggests that even though Baldwin has established religion as oppressive and corrupt, it still has the power to bring comfort and joy.

Suddenly, John sees the Lord, "for a moment only; and the darkness, for a moment only, is filled with a light he cannot bear." Then, John is "free." His tears flow "as from a fountain; his heart, like a fountain of waters, bursts." John continues to cry and is faintly aware of Elisha's voice in the background. "Oh, yes!" Elisha cries. "Bless our God forever!"

The book suggests that in the moment John sees the Lord, he is saved. He has been brought to judgement on the threshing-floor and found to be righteous, which implies that John is not *inherently sinful because he is a "bastard."*

John approaches Gabriel. "I'm saved," John says to his father. "It come from your mouth," Gabriel says. "I want to see you live it. It's more than a notion." Florence approaches John as well. "You fight the good fight," she says, "you hear? Don't you get weary, and don't you get scared. Because I *know* the Lord's done laid His hands on you."

This passage suggests that the holy way is difficult and will take hard work on John's behalf, but it also further portrays Gabriel as cruel. He is not encouraging like Florence, but instead seems to assume that John will fail.

Florence walks ahead with Gabriel. "You always been saying," she says to her brother, "how the Lord would answer prayer." She smiles, but Gabriel does not reciprocate. "[John] going to learn," Gabriel says, "that it ain't all in the sinning and the shouting—the way of holiness is a hard way. He got the steep side of the **mountain** to climb." Gabriel isn't convinced John will remain saved, but his own "name is written in the Book of Life." He knows he will see his "Savior's face in glory."

Gabriel is again convinced that John will fail and offers zero words of encouragement. The mountain again illustrates the difficult way of the holy path, which Gabriel pretends to navigate so easily. Baldwin implies that Gabriel's name isn't *written in "the Book of Life."*

"Yes," Florence says to Gabriel, "we's all going to be together there. [Rachel], and you, and me, and Deborah—and what was the name of that little girl who died not long after I left home?" she asks. "Is her name written in the Book of Life?" Gabriel stares at his sister. "He knows my life—He done forgive me a long time ago," Gabriel says.

Florence is being coy here. She knows that Gabriel believes Esther was a sinner, which means he doesn't believe her name to be in the Book of Life. Esther, however, was an innocent woman who died in part because Gabriel mistreated her, which makes him the sinner, Baldwin argues, not Esther.

"Looks like," Florence says to Gabriel, "you think the Lord's a man like you; you think you can fool Him like you fool men, and you think He forgets, like men." She pulls Deborah's letter from her purse and tells him she has carried it for more than thirty years. "Who is you met, Gabriel," she asks, "all your holy life long, you ain't made to drink a cup of sorrow?"

This moment speaks to the depth of Gabriel's sin. He has literally treated everyone badly—his mother, his sister, Esther, his children, and his wives—and surely, he must be made to pay for this in the afterlife.

"I got a son," Gabriel says, "and the Lord's going to raise him up." Florence laughs. "*That* son," she says, "that Roy. You going to weep for many a eternity before you see him crying in front of the altar like Johnny was crying tonight." Gabriel grows angrier. "I going to tell you something, Gabriel," Florence says. "I know you thinking at the bottom of your heart that if you just make *her*, her and her bastard boy, pay enough for her sin, *your* son won't have to pay for yours. Bu I ain't going to let you do that. You done made enough folks pay for sin, it's time you started paying."

Again, Gabriel expects Elizabeth (and John) to pay for his sins, which further reflects his misogyny. Gabriel is free to do what he wants, but Elizabeth pays dearly for the same (perceived) crime. By punishing them harshly for what he considers to be their sins, Gabriel thinks he will be afforded a free pass, but both Florence and Baldwin argue that this isn't the case. The book emphasizes that Elizabeth and John have not sinned—their perceived offenses hurt no one—but Gabriel has hurt everyone.

"What you think," Gabriel asks Florence, "you going to be able to do to me." She tells him that she will give Elizabeth the letter and tell everyone that "the Lord's anointed" has "blood on his hands." It will be good for Elizabeth to know, Florence says, that she isn't "the only sinner," and it will be good for John to know that he isn't "the only bastard." Gabriel sneers at her. "The Lord ain't going to let it come to pass," he says. "You going to be cut down."

Gabriel considers himself superior to Florence because he is a man, and he implies that God believes this too. In this way, Baldwin suggests that Christianity—or at least the way many people interpret it—is sexist as well, as it seeks to raise men above women. As such, Gabriel doesn't believe that Florence will ever be able to do him any harm because God won't allow it.

"Deborah was cut down," Florence says to Gabriel, "but she left word. She weren't no enemy of *nobody*—and she didn't see nothing but evil. When I go, brother, you better tremble, 'cause I ain't going to go in silence." Florence turns and walks in the direction of her subway, leaving Gabriel in the street.

Here, Baldwin more directly suggests that Deborah's treatment was misguided and downright false. She was a righteous woman, but knew only pain, and Florence again points this out. Here, Florence clearly has the upper hand and Gabriel is silenced. If only for a moment, she manages to hold some *power over him.*

John walks ahead with Elisha, feeling an "unspeakable joy" flood his heart. "Elisha?" John asks. "It was you, wasn't it, who prayed for me?" Elisha laughs. They were all praying, he says, but he was praying too. "Was you glad," John asks, "to see me at the altar?" Elisha says he was. "I was mighty glad to see little Johnny lay his sins on the altar." With the word "sin," John "shivers." He asks Elisha "how many faces the Devil" has, and Elisha confirms there are many. "But ain't nobody seen them all," he says.

This again implies that sin is everywhere and the holy way is a hard way, but John's "shiver" at the mention of "sin," especially by Elisha, again harkens to the shame John feels over his sexual thoughts and feelings for boys. John has already been judged by God, which implies God accepts John's homosexuality since he has been saved, but John is obviously still worried about his soul and eternal life.

"Elisha," John says again, "no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what *any*body says, you remember—please remember—I was saved. I was *there*." Elisha nods and smiles. He kisses John's forehead, "a holy kiss," and walks away toward his uncle's house to rest before Sunday morning service. John can feel Gabriel standing behind him and Elizabeth is standing on the front steps of their home, waiting for them to come inside. John turns and stares at Gabriel. "I'm ready," John says. "I'm coming. I'm on my way."

John seems to be attempting to remind Elisha not only that he was saved, but that God has saved and *accepted him and his sexuality, regardless of what society says. John's final line, "I'm ready. I'm coming. I'm on my way," is ambiguous. He could be talking to his mother or to Gabriel, or to God. Either way, John has obviously found some comfort and joy in his spiritual transformation, and he is now ready to face the world.*

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