The Fire Next Time

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BALDWIN

James Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924, the grandson of a slave and the eldest of nine children. Though his biological father was absent, a Baptist minister named David Baldwin soon became the young author's stepfather. Over the years, Baldwin's relationship with David would prove tenuous yet formative, since his eventual experience as a Youth Minister in an opposing church was both a result and defiance of his stepfather's example as a Baptist preacher. In retrospect, Baldwin identified his time in the church—preparing and delivering several sermons per week—as an important step in his development as a writer, since in this role he was forced to closely consider a wide range of human emotions. He calls upon this experience in his most celebrated novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, as well as in the play *The Amen Corner*. Upon graduating high school, Baldwin spent the majority of his time in Greenwich Village—at that time a hotbed of creativity and progressive thinking—working as a book reviewer. Around this time, the famous novelist Richard Wright identified Baldwin's talent and helped him earn a grant in order to work on a novel and sustain himself while doing so. Baldwin moved to Paris in 1948 with the hopes of both physically and psychologically distancing himself from America so that he could write about his country more clearly. The result came in 1953, when he published *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Baldwin returned to America in 1957, at which point he became involved with the Civil Rights Movement. This was the beginning of his celebrated career as an outspoken activist and socially-conscious public thinker, advocating for peaceful resolutions of America's racial tensions. Baldwin worked for the last ten years of his life in France, penning a number of essential works about American identity in the wake of the assassinations of Medgar Evers—a civil rights activist—and Martin Luther King, Jr. He died of stomach cancer in 1987 in Saint Paul de Vence, France.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Upon the publication of *The Fire Next Time* in 1963, America was celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, an anniversary that occasioned Baldwin's letter to his nephew. The country was also just one year away from establishing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or nationality. Despite this—and despite the fact that the racial segregation of public schools had been declared unconstitutional by the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown V. Board of Education*—race relations remained incredibly tense. Notably, George Wallace, governor of Alabama, delivered a bitter polemic in vehement support of segregation upon his inauguration in 1963. In this speech, he called for "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," a stubborn sentiment that, in comparison to Baldwin's magnanimous suggestion that true integration would mean showing even white oppressors love, revealed the governor's hateful message as destructive to the nation's necessary growth. An integrationist and proponent of love above all else, Baldwin's ideas in *The Fire Next Time* seemed to prophecy the legal end of segregation in 1964, while simultaneously understanding that, unfortunately, meaningful and lasting change was yet to come. "You know, and I know," he writes in his letter to his nephew, "that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Fire Next Time borrows its title from the spiritual slave song, "Mary Don't You Weep," which in turn references the Bible. The specific lyric, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more water, the fire next time!" deals with both *Genesis* and a moment in *The New Testament*. The mention of God giving Noah "the rainbow sign" references the moment in *Genesis* when God and Noah strike a covenant that God will never flood the earth again with water as a means of punishment, hence the line, "No more water…" The latter half of the lyric, "the fire next time!" pertains to the Second Epistle of Peter in *The New Testament*, when Peter points out that, though God promised to never use water again to wreck havoc on the earth, He never promised anything about refraining from using fire for such destruction. Peter prophecies that "the heavens will fall apart in fire and the heavenly bodies [will] melt in the flames" on the Day of Judgment. Baldwin draws on these lyrics and biblical prophecies to metaphorically warn Americans that, amidst the intense racial turmoil of the early 1960s, it is of the utmost importance that whites and blacks come together as one nation to end "the racial nightmare" and "change the history of the world." To preface "Down At The Cross," Baldwin draws on another famous literary work: "The White Man's Burden," an 1899 poem by British writer Rudyard Kipling. In it, Kipling encourages the United States to take up "the white man's burden," which he interprets as the responsibility of supposedly civilized whites to go forth and colonize nonwhite nations, the inhabitants of which he describes as "sullen peoples, / half devil and half child." Written at the beginning of the Philippine-American War, the poem was widely received as something of a call to arms, framing imperialism—or the spread of a country's power by means of military force—as a civic responsibility rather than as an act of greed. In evoking this poem, Baldwin

illustrates the point he eventually makes in "Down At The Cross" that America—and especially the American church—was built on merciless conquest and the sly technique of introducing its own culture to others as a way of eventually oppressing them.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Fire Next Time*
- **When Written:** The early 1960s
- **Where Written:** While traveling through the American South.
- **When Published:** "Down At The Cross" was first published as "Letter From A Region In My Mind" in the November 17, 1962 issue of *The New Yorker*. Similarly, "My Dungeon Shook" was first published as "A Letter to My Nephew" in the January 1, 1962 issue of *The Progressive*. The two pieces were then compiled for publication of *The Fire Next Time*, which appeared in 1963.
- **Literary Period:** Twentieth-century African-American Nonfiction
- **Genre:** Epistolary & Autobiographical Criticism
- **Setting:** The United States, especially Harlem
- **Climax:** Because *The Fire Next Time* is comprised of a letter and a critical essay, there is no discernible plot and, therefore, no specific climax. Rhetorically speaking, though, the theoretical stance Baldwin advances in both pieces ultimately reaches its zenith at the end of "Down At The Cross," when he suggests that if blacks and whites fail to come together in the face of their shared and troubled history, the already poor state of America's race relations will become even more catastrophic and destructive to the nation's well-being.
- **Antagonist:** The chief antagonistic force that Baldwin presents is an unwillingness to accept others, as this outlook ultimately oppresses African-Americans and divides the country between blacks and whites.
- **Point of View:** "My Dungeon Shook" is narrated by Baldwin in the first-person, addressing his nephew in the second-person. "Down At The Cross" is told in a more straightforward first-person narration from Baldwin's perspective.

EXTRA CREDIT

Between The World And Me. Ta-Nehisi Coates's book *Between The World And Me*, which won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 2015, borrows its title from Richard Wright's poem by the same name, but the phrase also appears in *The Fire Next Time*, which was another great influence on Coates. The line in *The Fire Next Time* reads: "That summer, in any case, all the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into the church." Like "My Dungeon Shook," *Between The World And Me* is written as an epistolary to a fourteen-year-old black boy—in Coates's case, to his son.

The New Yorker. In 1962, Baldwin was assigned by *The New Yorker* to write an account of Africa and its then current struggles. Instead, he wrote "Down At The Cross"—at that point entitled "Letter From A Region Of My Mind"—an essay that turned its attention not on Africa, but on America's own troubles. Despite this inconsistency, the magazine ran the piece.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Fire Next Time opens with a short letter to Baldwin's fourteen-year-old nephew, James, commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Baldwin tells James that when he imagines the boy's face he also sees the face of his brother (James's father) and the face of his own father (James's grandfather). He points out that James's grandfather even had a similar personality to the boy's, a certain strong-willed and assertive manner that Baldwin believes is designed to avoid looking weak or soft. After making this comparison, Baldwin tells James that his grandfather was ultimately undone—destroyed—by believing that he actually was what white society said he was: subhuman. It is for this reason that the man became religious. But James is not religious, Baldwin points out; rather, he represents a new era and a new way of thinking, and the author encourages his nephew not to make the same mistake as his grandfather by believing what white people say about him.

Baldwin's advice to his nephew has much to do with the past, both in terms of their family lineage and in terms of the historical injustices woven into the very fabric of America. He tells young James that the country into which they were both born is rigged against them, such that they are—from the moment of birth—set up to languish under white oppression. It's worth noting that, until this point, Baldwin refers to white Americans simply as James's "countrymen." These countrymen, he argues, are supposedly innocent (by which he means, for the most part, ignorant). This innocence—or, perhaps more accurately, this deluded *belief* that they are innocent—renders them unable to truly acknowledge the existence of African-Americans. And even when this existence *is* recognized, it is only to communicate the message that black people are worthless. Baldwin recognizes that this is, of course, a difficult thing to tell his nephew so bluntly, but he maintains that James can derive power and mobility from knowing the circumstances from which he has sprung. This involves understanding that the ugly beliefs thrust upon him are not based on any true reflection of inferiority, but rather on the sad insecurity of these white countrymen. Advising James not to waste his

energies in getting white people to accept him—for this is not important—Baldwin tells his nephew that, in fact, *he* is the one who must find a way to accept *them*. This is because they are ignorant and confused, "trapped in a history which they do not understand." The only way to shift the wretched racial paradigm in America—which instantly and instinctively subordinates black people—is to get whites to understand the country's fraught history and the atrocities they have committed to make it so. Only then, Baldwin makes clear, will these countrymen be able to understand themselves and, thus, their fellow black citizens.

At the end of this letter, Baldwin turns to the term *integration*, explaining that it is the kind of patient understanding explained above—the display of acceptance and love from blacks to whites—that is the only hope of convincing the white countrymen to "see themselves as they are" and start about the work of changing the structures of inequality built into the United States; in other words, to begin the process of true racial integration. About the centennial anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Baldwin says that "the country is celebrating freedom one hundred years too soon," and that in order for African-Americans to be free, white Americans must also be free.

In "Down At The Cross," the essay that follows, Baldwin discusses a turbulent period of his life when he, as a fourteen-year-old, began to recognize the realities of growing up as an African-American in Harlem. During that summer, he watched many of his peers gravitate toward crime, sensing for the first time that the criminals he frequently saw on the streets—the pimps, prostitutes, and drug users—were models of what he could easily become. It occurred to him that these people, whom he had always looked upon as different than him, had all come from the same circumstances as he did. In order to avoid the evil of the streets—as well as the evil he suddenly believed he himself was capable of—he became involved in **church** life.

In addition to witnessing his peers flock to the dangers of the street, Baldwin began to see that the boys around him would never surpass their fathers in terms of their accomplishments or social stations. His own father started pushing for him to quit school and start working, but Baldwin refused, a gesture that was more an act of defiance than a belief in education. Once, after Baldwin introduced his father to one of his friends, his father asked if the boy was saved, and when Baldwin revealed that his friend was Jewish, his father slapped him hard across the face. In response, Baldwin told his father that his friend was ultimately a better Christian than he was. From a retrospective vantage point, Baldwin sees this interaction as a moment in which he and his father acknowledged the struggle they were in against one another—his father as the authority figure, Baldwin as the retaliator.

All African-American boys around this time in their lives, Baldwin argues, seek out a "gimmick," or something to occupy themselves with and invest in as a way of coping with the fears instilled in them by a racist society. As a fourteen-year-old, Baldwin was coming to consciousness regarding the racial disparities thrust upon him, in addition to identifying the multiple forms of authority acting upon him (including that of his father). By joining a church that was not the one his father preached in, his "gimmick" satisfied the dual purpose of helping him deal with his fears of succumbing to a meaningless life on the streets while also challenging his father's control over him. As an adult, he recognizes that by joining the church, he essentially traded one authority figure for another. To be sure, when his friend first brought him to church, the pastor looked at him and asked the same question that the pimps and other criminals on the street used to ask him: "Whose little boy are you?" In writing *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin can finally provide the true answer to this question: "Why, yours."

Facing the many confusions of regular adolescent life *and* the complicated process of finally understanding the racial problems keeping him down, Baldwin was intuitively searching for somebody to take control over him and guide him along. And though he eventually wound up finding religion full of the same false hopes as other "gimmicks," he expresses his gratitude for the fact that he found the church during this volatile time instead of some other riskier and more ensnaring alternative. Nonetheless, Baldwin gradually became skeptical of religion, developing a mistrust that he explains by outlining the history of the Christian church. An institution built on spreading the gospel, the dissemination of Christianity depended heavily on the subjugation of others. Baldwin suggests that anybody hoping to lead a moral life will thus have to reexamine the core tenets of Christianity, since Christianity has been so fundamental to imperialism.

This look at the Christian church leads to an investigation of an opposing ideology: the Nation of Islam, a black separatist movement that uses elements of the Islamic religion to advance and prioritize black welfare and prosperity. Baldwin explains the beliefs of the Nation of Islam and its leader Elijah Muhammad, who once hosted Baldwin at his mansion in Chicago. According to members of the NOI, black people once ruled the earth entirely. It wasn't until the devil himself created white people that this changed—and even then, Allah merely allowed for the "white devils" to rule for a limited amount of time, a period which—at the time of Baldwin's writing—was supposedly coming to an end. In his meeting with Elijah and a slew of other NOI followers, Baldwin was unconvinced by the idea that he ought to invest himself in a prophecy that favors African-Americans over white Americans. Above all else, though, Baldwin identifies power as the NOI's main preoccupation, as this is what the conversation at Elijah's mansion predominantly revolved around. The idea that all white people "are cursed, and are devils, and are about to be brought down" is, Baldwin believes, a mirror image of the kind

of divisive ideology set forth by Christianity, an ideology he has already shown to be deeply oppressive and flawed.

Despite his disagreement, though, Baldwin spends time making clear the fact that he understands—even, perhaps, sympathizes with—how somebody might arrive at this kind of thinking after generations of being oppressed by white people. He posits that there is no real reason black people should be expected to approach the country's racial problem with more grace, patience, and goodwill than white people.

Instead of reacting to white oppression by advancing similar—yet opposite—segregationist solutions, Baldwin urges Americans to examine history and to attempt to accept it, no matter how difficult it is to come to terms with such a tense and troubled past. He illustrates this by relating a conversation he had with one of the members of Elijah's set, a man who drove him to where he needed to go after his dinner at the NOI's headquarters. During the drive, Baldwin asked the young man how the NOI was going to go about taking over the American land they felt was due to them. To prove to Baldwin their power and the realistic nature of their claims, the driver responded by stating that African-Americans are yearly responsible for twenty-billion dollars in the American economy, a figure the man insists shows the strength of the NOI's cause. Engaging with this line of thinking, Baldwin points out that this large amount of money doesn't exist independently, but rather as part of the American economy as a whole, meaning that black Americans would lose much of their power if separated from the rest of the country's marketplace. In this moment, Baldwin tries to get the driver to see that, for this goal of separated independence to happen, the "entire frame of reference" upon which the original desire is founded would have to drastically change. And though he didn't press the issue any further with the driver, Baldwin goes on in the essay to say that it is necessary to acknowledge and even accept the current situation and the history that produced it in order to change any given situation. In this case, it is best to understand the fact that one cannot simply propose a brand new racial reality, but rather one must create change organically out of present realities—difficult though it may seem.

At this point, Baldwin trains his thoughts on the idea of segregation, a hot topic in the early 1960s. He argues that the 1954 Supreme Court decision to outlaw racial segregation in public schools was less an act of progress (as white liberals were so eager to deem it) than it was a competitive and defensive move in the Cold War. With Russia threatening the spread of Communism, the United States needed the sympathy and alliance of African nations—sympathy it would be hard to win if prejudice and oppression against black people was literally written into the country's laws. Therefore, Baldwin suggests, the end of segregation was an appeal to Africa in the greater struggle against the USSR. This further reinforces the unfortunate American reality that concessions of freedom or equality seem to be have been made only insofar as they benefit the white power structure. The sad fact of the matter is that, more than any other Western country, the United States "has been best placed to prove the uselessness and the obsolescence of the concept of color. But it has not dared to accept this opportunity, or even to conceive of it as an opportunity." Indeed, Baldwin's assessment of America's false progress unearths the country's unwillingness to truly examine itself.

The solution to this, Baldwin asserts despite a risk of sentimentality, is love. At the very least, white America must learn to love itself, which ultimately means learning to accept its diverse composition. And Baldwin urges African-Americans to keep on doing what they have done for generations: not succumbing to hate. As far as creating a healthy **nation**, white people need black people and black people need white people. This, he argues, is the only path to a collective resilience. In his final words, Baldwin issues a concerned warning that—borrowing metaphorically from a slave spiritual that references the Bible—if Americans fail to come together, destruction and fire will come.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

James Baldwin – *The Fire Next Time* is written from the perspective of the author himself, James Baldwin, an African-American who was born into poverty in Harlem in 1924. Known as a writer of both literary and intellectual excellence, Baldwin was devoted to equality, love, and racial integration. Although *The Fire Next Time* is perhaps first and foremost a critical examination of race relations in the United States, it also draws on Baldwin's immediate experiences, often evoking his closest relationships as a way of further exploring his ideas about American identity. In "My Dungeon Shook," for example, he addresses his nephew, also named James. Later, in "Down At The Cross," Baldwin gives an account of his complicated and embattled relationship with his stepfather, the Baptist preacher David Baldwin, conjuring this tension in order to illustrate his own first experiences with religion and the Christian **church**. In this way, Baldwin floats between autobiographical narration and an academic, argument-based style.

James – James Baldwin's fourteen-year-old nephew. James bears a striking resemblance to his father, the author's brother, and even exhibits, according to Baldwin, a similar personality: a tendency to act aggressively in order to not appear weak. This trait, Baldwin thinks, is quite possibly the inherited traces of James's grandfather (Baldwin's father), whom the boy never met. Baldwin warns James against becoming too much like his grandfather, who disastrously believed that he deserved the

way white people treated him. Despite the few similarities between James and his grandfather, though, Baldwin believes that the boy's contemporary outlook makes him well-positioned to avoid the kind of mistakes his grandfather made, remaining optimistic about the future even while warning his nephew that the world he lives in has been designed to keep him oppressed.

Baldwin's Father – James Baldwin's stepfather, to whom he never refers by name, and with whom he had a contentious and even bitter relationship. As a teenager, Baldwin views his father as a relentless authority figure dominating his life. In an attempt to break out from his father's control, Baldwin becomes a Youth Minister at a different **church** than the one his father preaches in. Though this is a slight, Baldwin's father finally gives Baldwin space, allowing him to work on sermons and thus establish something of his own identity. However, the young author's path to independence is somewhat ironically modeled on David's, the very figure of authority he is trying to undermine.

Elijah Muhammad – The leader of the Nation of Islam, a religious black separatist group. Although Baldwin disagrees with Elijah's belief that all whites are "devils" and that the future of the world includes only black people, he understands the impulse and logic driving Elijah's beliefs. He is even impressed by Elijah's ability to bring black people together and to, in a sense, save them from the horrors and traps of abject poverty and oppression. Baldwin, though sympathetic to Elijah's outlook, is unable to see eye-to-eye with the Nation of Islam because of its commitment to religion and its general "us versus them" perspective. Still, he depicts Elijah as a kind, intelligent man with a face that indicates pain and reminds Baldwin of his father.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Baldwin's Brother – James's father and Baldwin's younger brother. Baldwin only mentions his brother in order to tell James that he takes after him.

Nation of Islam Driver – A member of the Nation of Islam who drives Baldwin after the author has dinner at Elijah Muhammad's mansion.

Malcolm X – An influential African-American activist and the second in command of the Nation of Islam.

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.

AUTHORITY AND OPPRESSION

The Fire Next Time examines race relations in America by interrogating the various power dynamics at play between white and black citizens. Baldwin makes it clear that norms surrounding authority—and the narratives that Americans of all races perpetuate regarding its influence—sustain a pattern of black oppression in the United States. Concerning himself with how these longstanding beliefs about power are wrought, Baldwin demonstrates that parents (including black parents) ultimately teach their children a model of inequity from a young age, which sets the stage for the ongoing disenfranchisement of African-Americans. In both the opening letter ("My Dungeon Shook") and the subsequent essay ("Down At The Cross"), the initiations of young people into the country's previously-established racial animosities and plights demonstrate the importance of being aware—and in control—of the stories people tell themselves about who they are and what they believe.

There are, Baldwin argues, "filters" of authority that African-American parents project onto their children, ultimately teaching them to live under a complex form of subjugation from an early age. Behind every black parent, he asserts, stands another more absolute and intangible form of power: the white man. When a black parent scolds, instructs, or even shows affection, the child perceives the hierarchal framework his or her parent is operating within, the background machinations of an ever-present and oppressive white authoritative figure. This influences the way the child views both the world and him- or herself.

The *Fire Next Time* explores this cultivation of inequality in "My Dungeon Shook" and "Down At The Cross," though each piece addresses the issue slightly differently. In the first, Baldwin counsels his young nephew, James, saying, "you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger." As such, he invites his nephew to actively participate in the construction of his own identity rather than simply acquiescing to the narrative handed down to him by his elders, who have already taken their cues from the prevailing racial norms. "Down At The Cross," on the other hand, begins with a look at the author's own impressionable adolescence when he was working through his relationship with the primary authoritative figure in his life, his father. Rather than succumbing to a drug-filled life on the streets, Baldwin joined a different **church** from the one in which his father preached, which implicitly challenged his father's authority. Instead of finding freedom, however, Baldwin stumbled upon yet another person assuming a role of power over him: a pastor ready to take him into the fold, asking, "Whose little boy are you?" In retrospect, Baldwin understands this question to signify ownership and, thus, power.

By becoming a Youth Minister in a church that was not the one

his father belonged to or preached in, Baldwin could finally escape his father's control with the excuse that he needed privacy to work on his own sermons; "I pushed this advantage ruthlessly, for it was the most effective means I had found of breaking his hold over me." It's worth noting that Baldwin laid waste to his father's position of power by following the exact same path his father had followed in the first place (a religious one); thus, he and his father derived authority from the same source, which was a religion that had justified segregation, imperialism, racism, and barbarism for centuries. "I had immobilized him," Baldwin writes of his father. "It took rather more time for me to realize that I had also immobilized myself, and had escaped from nothing whatever." According to Baldwin, the futility of his attempt to defy authority arose from the fact that religion is one of many "gimmicks" that offer empty solace to African-Americans wishing to escape racial oppression. Each "gimmick"—whether it comes in the form of religion, street life, or even prize-fighting—is a stand-in for the greater model of subservience demanded by the white-ruled society, offering little in the way of true liberation.

HISTORY AND RELIGION

The Fire Next Time was published in 1963, 100 years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. The early sixties were a time of heated debate regarding racial segregation, and much of that debate was inflected by religion. Many Christian groups—such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to name just one—were foundational to the Civil Rights Movement, basing their calls for equality within the framework of Christianity's celebration of love and kindness. On the other hand, though, with its long history of conquest and enslavement, Christian ideology was also used by white people to reinforce racist agendas. Although much of Baldwin's thinking is influenced by the Christian virtues he grew up with, *The Fire Next Time* largely focuses on the religion's divisive qualities. His critique of **the church** is rooted in his disapproval of the black-and-white, us-versus-them mentality that it so often (though not always) advances, a disapproval that he does not singularly reserve for Christianity. Another group he critically examines is the Nation of Islam, a religious and cultural organization that used Islamic beliefs to argue that the time for white rule was soon coming to an end and that, according to Allah, black people would imminently rise to power. Addressing both the racist history of the Christian church and what he views as the equally unproductive aspirations of the Nation of Islam, Baldwin dissects the way religion has for centuries been wielded as an instrument of inequality and oppression.

In "Down At The Cross," Baldwin discusses the rise of the white Christian to power. He points out that "Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty—necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels." This is a reference to early Christian missionaries, whose job was to spread the religion in foreign lands, an endeavor that Baldwin points out conveniently became a "justification for the planting of the flag." In other words, as whites took it upon themselves to supposedly theologically liberate black countries, Christianity became an excuse for domination, control, and conquest. Given this fraught history, Baldwin is skeptical of Christianity's ability to unite blacks and whites, identifying it as a poor model for equality. He posits that, in order to lead a sound moral life, one must "first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we god rid of Him."

Baldwin also turns a critical eye on the Nation of Islam, which he considers to be nearly a mirror image of the white Christian subordination of African-Americans. Whereas many white Christians believe that blacks are descended from Ham (a cursed biblical character whose ancestors are destined to be slaves), the Nation of Islam believes that the devil invented white people, whom Allah allowed to rule the earth for only for "a certain number of years." About this theory, Baldwin points out that "the dream, the sentiment is old; only the color is new." He remains as unconvinced by the Nation of Islam as he was by Christianity, though he patiently concedes that there is no reason to expect African-Americans to rise above this sort of black-and-white thinking any more than Caucasians.

Nonetheless, Baldwin makes it clear that, in order to escape the simplistic thinking that religion encourages, one must understand and accept the complex history of black oppression. African-Americans have been shaped by the oppressive ideologies and actions of white Christians, and though the Nation of Islam strives to step outside of this framework by living separately from white people, Baldwin argues that African-Americans cannot resort to escapism; instead, they must contend with the fact that they have been shaped by the society in which they live and strive to improve that reality, rather than flee it. Only then, he argues, will black people be capable of changing the racial situation in "concrete terms," though Baldwin does not offer specific examples of what these concrete terms might be. Instead, Baldwin is chiefly interested in discussing the intellectual circumstances that might bring about change—circumstances that require this acceptance of history; "To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it." Thus, Baldwin asks black Americans to immerse themselves in their painful past in order to deploy it in the present.

The Fire Next Time takes cues from a slave spiritual called "Mary Don't You Weep," borrowing its epigraph and title from the song's lyrics, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, / No more

water, the fire next time!" This line references two biblical stories, one in which God promises Noah that He will never again punish the earth by unleashing floods, and another in which Peter points out that, though God has promised not to destroy the world using water, there has been no such promise regarding fire. Thus, Baldwin turns to both history and theology to make his point that, if blacks and whites fail to acknowledge their history and band together to "end the racial nightmare," this Biblical prophecy might be fulfilled. Although this may sound like a warning or even a threat, it is more accurately a sincere expression of Baldwin's deep concern about the turmoil America faced in 1963; a turmoil we are most unfortunately still struggling with today. And though Baldwin's very hope for America—a hope that exalts love, kindness, and unity—is itself shaped by a deeply Christian impulse, he makes it clear that the institution itself has gone off the rails with its "sanctification of power" and that, as such, Christianity has lost sight of its own defining virtues.

LOVE

Baldwin frames love as something hopeful and restorative, a means by which America might achieve something like unity. In "My Dungeon Shook," he tells James: "We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived." Herein lies the notion that compassion and camaraderie present perhaps the only way to survive the long history of injustice and suffering at the hands of bigots. Baldwin takes this a step further when he encourages his nephew to project this goodwill across supposed enemy lines, emphasizing that he must even love white people; "You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope."

Embedded in this advice lies an argument essential to understanding Baldwin's perception of American unity: distracted by various deeply-sown racist strongholds, white people fail to see that—just as African-American history is intertwined with that of White America—they are products of a country comprised of both whites *and* blacks. In other words, "Whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves." As such, they are incapable of fully accepting or loving themselves, which is why Baldwin instructs his nephew to extend his understanding to them. A white person's inability to love a black person is, in effect, an inability to love him- or herself, and vice versa.

Love, for Baldwin, is an agent of change. It is something to be used to move toward freedom. There exists a deep insecurity in the white persona, which is then forced onto African-Americans with disastrous consequences to the general harmony and accord of the country. "Love," writes Baldwin, "takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth." For Baldwin, then, love is the great equalizer, and it is this "quest and daring and growth" that Americans must undertake *together* as blacks and whites "if we are really to become a nation." Anything standing in the way of this—"gimmicks," figures of authority, religious beliefs—only detracts from America's strength.

FEAR

Fear is laced throughout *The Fire Next Time*. In fact, it lurks behind important elements of the three previous themes: authority, religion, and love. Baldwin concerns himself in particular with how fear can act as a divisive catalyst, something that drives white and black people apart and supports racist patterns.

When Baldwin sought out the Christian **church** as a teenager, he did so for fear of the "whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue," who had suddenly become "a personal menace" now that he realized he could grow up to become one of them. In this way, religion was a safe house of sorts, easing his fears (if only temporarily) by giving him a community that wasn't outwardly sinister, and by giving him the Christian idea of salvation, which was something the young author could invest in and work toward, thus calming his fear that he might be destined for a meaningless, marginalized life on the Harlem streets.

Fear also pertains to Baldwin's examination of religion overall. Inherent to both white Christian racism and its separationist counterpart found in the Nation of Islam is the fear of The Other—a person or group of people that supposedly poses a threat to one's way of life and his or her system of beliefs. This is apparent in the history of white Christians using religious oppression to keep African Americans under their control, and with the Nation of Islam's wholehearted mistrust of "white devils."

Fear is yet again identifiable immediately in Baldwin's discussion of authority. In writing about the "filters" of authority that children detect in their parents' behavior, he highlights the child's sensitivity to any indication of the "uncontrollable note of fear heard in [the child's] mother's or his father's voice when he has strayed beyond some particular boundary." This "boundary," of course, is a racial one, something the child can only intuit but not yet fully grasp. "He reacts to the fear in his parents' voices because his parents hold up the world for him and he has no protection without them." From an early age, then, African-American children instinctively learn to fear—and therefore, unfortunately, respect—the authoritative structures that shape their lives. And if somebody fears and inadvertently respects the powers controlling her life, it is that

much more difficult to do anything to change the circumstances of her existence.

Finally, Baldwin's concept of love is in conversation with this notion of fear, since he presents love as one of the only ways of escaping the inhibitions that arise from being afraid. Baldwin's is a mobilized form of love, active in its mission to change human relationships for the better. Because fear is unfortunately involved in not only America's warring religious institutions, but also in the identity construction of the country's young people, it becomes of the utmost importance that all sides come together and, "like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others." Love, it seems, is the only way forward in the face of fear, and if we "do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world."

SYMBOLS

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

THE CHURCH

Reflecting Baldwin's gift for holding two seemingly-contradictory ideas in his mind at once, the church in *The Fire Next Time* simultaneously represents oppressive authority and hope and community. Baldwin, whose abusive father was a minister, grew up with religion at the center of his family life. As Baldwin sees it, the church's oppressive potential has many facets. First, a focus on spirituality over action can encourage black parishioners to become complacent with their lives, rather than agitating for concrete improvements. Second, the Christian church's emphasis on spreading the gospel has justified centuries of brutal imperialism and subjugation. Related to this, Baldwin identifies in theology—both Christian and, interestingly, in the theology of the black nationalist religious group the Nation of Islam—a strain of "us versus them" thinking that is used to justify many social ills, including racism. Therefore, Baldwin believes that a truly moral life cannot be one lived blindly in thrall to organized religion. At the same time, Baldwin acknowledges the many positive aspects of religion. As an adolescent, for example, Baldwin's involvement with the church kept him from falling into criminal activity and gave him purpose and community. Baldwin describes the blissful unity he experienced while preaching: "Their pain and their joy were mine, and mine were theirs." In a way, this is exactly the kind of unity Baldwin hopes America might someday find, though he doesn't believe that religion is the proper means of achieving understanding and integration. Because the Christian church was built on oppression and conquest, he yearns for a secular means of banding together.

THE NATION

When Baldwin discusses "the nation," he is often literally referring to the United States of America, but, over the course of the book, the term "nation" comes to take on a deeper significance: Baldwin uses the term to refer to how he believes things *could* or *should* be between white and black people in America, rather than referring to the "nation" as it presently is. Baldwin calls attention to the fact that African-Americans are perhaps the only people in the world who cannot be said to truly belong to a nation, for the country they're supposed to be part of utterly rejects them; "It is only 'the so-called American Negro' who remains trapped, disinherited, and despised, in a nation that has kept him in bondage for nearly four hundred years and is still unable to recognize him as a human being." In this way, it becomes clear that the word "nation"—insofar as it relates to America—ought to be synonymous with the idea of racial unity. Furthermore, Baldwin argues that if America *were* to become the nation it should be—one in which a person's race no longer dictates their power—then America would become the powerful example to the rest of the world that it should be. Thus, Baldwin's ideal "nation" is one in which Americans of all races are equal and able to love one another, and this unity is spread across the globe.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Fire Next Time* published in 1992.

My Dungeon Shook Quotes

❝ Well, he is dead, he never saw you, and he had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him. This is one of the reasons that he became so holy…You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), Baldwin's Father, James

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin writes this to James in reference to his own father,

who was the boy's grandfather, though James never met him. Baldwin states in a rather blunt manner that his father had "a terrible life," which suggests that he is not particularly sentimental about his father's death. In this way, it becomes clear that, more than eulogizing his father, Baldwin wants to use him as an example; he wants to teach James using the mistakes his father made, the most damning of which was his tendency to believe the detrimental things white people said about him.

Baldwin believes that his father became "holy" as a way of dealing with the self-hatred instilled in him by white people, a technique the author clearly does not condone, for he insists that his father was "defeated long before he died." By imploring James to not believe that he is "what the white world calls a *nigger*," Baldwin stresses the importance of having an internal compass of sorts—a sense of self that will not allow him to, like his grandfather, believe "at the bottom of his heart" the wretched things white America forces upon him.

know" the extent to which they have "destroyed" the lives of people like Baldwin's brother is, he believes, inexcusable. Baldwin's use of the word "want" in this sentence reminds readers that white ignorance is indeed a choice.

By ignoring history, white people try to remain "innocent," for if they don't acknowledge the pain their ancestors caused, they can't fully shoulder the blame. The words "tough" and "philosophical" speak to this removed attitude that white Americans seem to strive for, and Baldwin concedes that this stance is a common one in other contexts, though he points out that it doesn't have to be this way, remarking that "*most* of mankind is not *all* of mankind." By saying that this attitude is not "permissible," he ultimately encourages his nephew to avoid accepting the current reality, as so many others—like Baldwin's father—have done before him. White people, he shows, must be held accountable for the violent history they've brought to bear on African Americans, and this means waking them up from their so-called "innocence."

❝ I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. (But remember: *most* of mankind is not *all* of mankind.) But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), Baldwin's Brother, James

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin offers this knowledge to James after explaining that knowing the boy's father for so long has enabled him to understand things about the man that nobody else can. Baldwin sees the pain embedded in his brother's face even when he is smiling, and he knows the extent to which oppression perpetrated by white America has influenced him. The fact that white people in America "do not want to

❝ Well, you were born, here you came, something like fifteen years ago; and though your father and mother and grandmother, looking about the streets through which they were carrying you, staring at the walls into which they brought you, had every reason to be heavyhearted, yet they were not. For here you were, Big James, named for me—you were a big baby, I was not—here you were, to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever, to strengthen you against the loveless world. Remember that: I know how black it looks today, for you. It looked bad that day, too, yes, we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children's children.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), James

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Baldwin attempts to give James some optimism to hold onto in trying times. By telling his nephew that he arrived in this world "to be loved," he frames James's very existence—and, arguably, the existence of any human—as if the very purpose of living is to love and be loved. This is in keeping with Baldwin's notion that love, unlike power or authority (which are always shifting), is a

constant and reliable force capable of sustaining people through difficult times. There is no shortage of difficult times; even when James was born, the boy's parents and Baldwin were suffering. However, they "survived," though they wouldn't have if they hadn't relied on their love for one another. Indeed, they were "trembling," afraid of both the racism they had already experienced and the racism yet to come.

> The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear. Please try to be clear, dear James, through the storm which rages about your youthful head today, about the reality which lies behind the words *acceptance* and *integration*. There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), James

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin implores James to steel himself against the terrible things white people would have him believe about himself. This is similar to Baldwin's earlier advice, which used James's downtrodden grandfather as an example of what happens if a black man invests himself in a self-image cultivated by white people. Here, though, Baldwin uses the discussion of self-worth to pivot to an examination of the value of accepting white people despite their malevolence. It becomes clear that there is only one way to do this, and that is by showing love. Although Baldwin typically frames love optimistically, here he jokes that it is a "terrible thing" that James must feel love in order to accept white people. What's "terrible" about this is that this love must come from a place of extreme strength, for it has to overcome the "details and symbols" of oppression and hate that have been laced throughout James's life by white bigots.

> They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), James

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin writes this to James regarding the skewed and largely ahistorical image of reality that white Americans manage to create for themselves. Racist white people have been taught for "many years" that black people are "inferior," a belief that makes it easier to oppress the African-American population. To "act" on a belief, Baldwin maintains, requires full involvement with the issue at stake. After all, there is no way to act on something without engaging with it on all levels. This is what Baldwin means when he says that "to act is to be committed." At the heart of the matter, Baldwin is saying that even white people who know blacks are not inferior are unwilling to fully commit themselves to this belief because their own identities—regardless of what they truly believe—are based on the notion that they are superior.

> But these men are your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), James

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Urging James to see white Americans as his "lost, younger brothers," Baldwin increases the likelihood that his nephew will be able to extend love to a set of people who harbor such a brazen disregard for his own wellbeing. By framing

white people as "lost" and "young," he emphasizes how pathetic it is that they feel they must debase African-Americans in order to confidently establish their own identity, rooting it firmly in a false notion of superiority. By saying, "if the word *integration* means anything," Baldwin reveals his skepticism regarding the word, which white people seem to use so often but act upon so rarely. At the time, integration was a heavily debated topic, but it was primarily treated by white people as an offering of sorts to African-Americans, as if it were some kind of reward instead of a right. This, of course, is not in keeping with Baldwin's belief that black people need not worry about *being* accepted, but rather about finding a way *to* accept. It is the latter that Baldwin here urges James to do, showing that the acceptance of white people will involve "forc[ing]" them "with love" to recognize the problematic racial circumstances in America.

Down At The Cross Quotes

Neither civilized reason nor Christian love would cause any of those people to treat you as they presumably wanted to be treated; only the fear of your power to retaliate would cause them to do that, or to seem to do it, which was (and is) good enough. There appears to be a vast amount of confusion on this point, but I do not know many Negroes who are eager to be "accepted" by white people, still less to be loved by them; they, the blacks, simply don't wish to be beaten over the head by the whites every instant of our brief passage on this planet.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Baldwin rather uncharacteristically seems to encourage African-Americans to act in such a way that will cause fear in their white countrymen. He presents this as perhaps the only way to lead a life of relative safety as a black person, since "civilized reason" and "Christian love" have proven themselves unable to deflect racist attention and oppression. By arguing this, Baldwin demonstrates just how limited the options are when it comes to a black person's ability to protect his or her safety and dignity. When even the core tenets of the Christian church fail to protect black people from harm in a country founded and run by white Christians, what else is left? Unfortunately, this is a cyclical problem, because the more white people fear black people, the harder they work to keep them in a place of subjugation—a point Baldwin addresses elsewhere but leaves unvoiced here.

Every Negro boy—in my situation during those years, at least—who reaches this point realizes, at once, profoundly, because he wants to live, that he stands in great peril and must find, with speed, a "thing," a gimmick, to lift him out, to start him on his way. And it does not matter what the gimmick is. It was this last realization that terrified me and—since it revealed that the door opened on so many dangers—helped to hurl me into the church. And, by an unforeseeable paradox, it was my career in the church that turned out, precisely, to be my gimmick.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

As Baldwin remembers his tumultuous experience as a black teenager coming to understand the racial power structures at play in his life, he highlights the importance of finding a way to survive by way of a "gimmick" (a community, activity, or belief that can keep a person from hopelessness). It is notable that the language he uses in this passage is urgent and somewhat desperate; when a black boy reaches a certain age, Baldwin says, he must find his gimmick "at once" and "with speed"—"because he wants to live." This pressing language evokes the dire immediacy that black teenagers experience at this moment in their lives, when the world is furiously turning against them. To be sure, Baldwin says that he was "hurl[ed]" into the church, a phrase whose very hastiness illustrates the previous assertion that "it does not matter what the gimmick is."

I rushed home from school, to the church, to the altar, to be alone there, to commune with Jesus, my dearest Friend, who would never fail me, who knew all the secrets of my heart. Perhaps He did, but I didn't, and the bargain we struck, actually, down there at the foot of the cross, was that He would never let me find out.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Baldwin remembers his time as a Young Minister fervently working on his sermons, feeling purposeful and important for perhaps the first time in his life. When he speaks of the "bargain" he made with Jesus "down there at the foot of the cross," he is referencing an old Christian hymn from which this essay takes its name. In the hymn, the singer rejoices that, when he went to the cross where Jesus died, Jesus washed away all his sins. It soon becomes clear in the hymn, though, that a full devotion to the Lord is necessary if one is to have his or her sins washed away. This is the bargain to which Baldwin refers in this moment.

Baldwin asserts that while Jesus may have known "all the secrets of [his] heart," he himself did not. And because Baldwin views religion as a gimmick that obfuscates the true reality of one's position in a racially fraught nation, he believes that "the bargain" he and Jesus struck "down there at the foot of the cross," in which he devoted himself to his Savior, rendered it literally impossible for him to ever find out for himself "all the secrets of [his] heart," for religion itself was the very thing standing in his way.

> Perhaps we were, all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so, within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

This passage champions the power of communing—in almost any form and around almost anything at all—to achieve love. Even oppression, it seems, constitutes something that can draw people together, whether they are "pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, [or] children." Baldwin speaks of the "complex of risks" that the oppressed must "run," a phrase that suggests—by its use of the word "complex"—that specific manifestations of oppression range widely between peoples' varied experiences. Rather than pointing to this as evidence that oppression keeps people apart or renders them fundamentally different from one another, Baldwin celebrates this idea—after all, assembling a mosaic of experience around a common touchstone (oppression, in this case) is exactly the kind of freedom toward which America should aspire.

> We had the liquor the chicken, the music, and each other, and had no need to pretend to be what we were not. This is the freedom that one hears in some gospel songs, for example, and in jazz. In all jazz, and especially the blues, there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged. White Americans seem to feel that happy songs are *happy* and sad songs are *sad*, and that, God help us, is exactly the way most white Americans sing them—sounding, in both cases, so helplessly, defenselessly fatuous that one dare not speculate on the temperature of the deep freeze from which issue their brave and sexless little voices.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

This contemplation of jazz comes after Baldwin's thoughts regarding the ways in which oppression can unite people. Remembering the parties he attended once he finally left the church, Baldwin fondly recalls the feeling of spending time with his friends and not needing to "pretend to be what [they] were not." The menace of oppression seems to have hovered about the party atmosphere he describes, as shown by his assertion that the experience of those parties was not unlike "the freedom that one hears in some gospel songs, for example, and in jazz." This is the "double-edged" sound, a mixture of happiness and sadness that gives feeling to the music, finding a way to access the full spectrum of emotion. In poking fun at white Americans' tendency to think of songs as either completely happy or completely sad, Baldwin holds up what is seen in *The Fire Next Time* as a

characteristic flaw in white thinking; namely, the impulse to think in a cut-and-dry, black-and-white manner that has detrimental consequences when it comes to questions of race and equality.

> The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality—this touchstone can be only oneself. Such a person interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes. And these attitudes, furthermore, though the person is usually unaware of it (is unaware of so much!), are historical and public attitudes. They do not relate to the present any more than they relate to the person. Therefore, whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

In order to explain how white Americans find themselves in a position of not fully knowing themselves, Baldwin points yet again to their inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the reality of the country's current situation as it pertains to race. The idea that white Americans put a "labyrinth of attitudes" between reality and themselves wonderfully illustrates the complex nature of their ignorance; Baldwin does not say that there *is* a labyrinth of attitudes between white people and reality, but rather that they themselves "interpose" it between themselves and the world. As such, he depicts white people as willfully ignorant, and the difficult "labyrinth" as a construction of their own making designed to hide America's ugly racial dynamics. At the same time, however, these attitudes are quite deeply planted into white culture, since they are derived from history, albeit a history that does not "relate to the present" anymore. Winding through their historically useless labyrinths, then, white people are able to ignore the facts about contemporary race relations. Unfortunately for them, their true history has much to do with African-Americans, so by ignoring it, they essentially relinquish their ability to understand the circumstances that have formed them.

> In the realm of power, Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty—necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels. This particular true faith, moreover, is more deeply concerned about the soul than it is about the body, to which fact the flesh (and the corpses) of countless infidels bears witness. It goes without saying, then, that whoever questions the authority of the true faith also contests the right of the nations that hold this faith to rule over him—contests, in short, their title to his land. The spreading of the Gospel, regardless of the motives or the integrity or the heroism of some of the missionaries, was an absolutely indispensable justification for the planting of the flag.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Continuing his examination of the Christian church's morality, Baldwin illustrates the oppressive greed inherent to the religion's spread across the globe. He points out that anybody who believes her religion is the absolute truth is then charged with the task of converting others, a task she is happy and willing to shoulder due to her undying faith and commitment. In doing so, these missionaries take over foreign lands. This means that if a native of a conquered land disagrees with the religion forced upon him, he also, in effect, contests the missionaries' right to his homeland. As such, Christians had an early incentive to oppress others by convincing them to believe wholeheartedly in the church—religion, then, became a means of power, a force that acts "with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty." Baldwin is primarily interested in putting pressure on the fact that the church has been "unmitigated." By spelling out the greedy means by which Christianity snatched the world's power, he makes it possible to begin to contest and influence the institution.

But the policemen were doing nothing now. Obviously, this was not because they had become more human but because they were under orders and because they were afraid. And indeed they were, and I was delighted to see it. There they stood, in twos and threes and fours, in their Cub Scout uniforms and with their Cub Scout faces, totally unprepared, as is the way American he-men, for anything that could not be settled with a club or a fist or a gun. I might have pitied them if I had not found myself in their hands so often and discovered, through ugly experience, what they were like when *they* held the power and what they were like when *you* held the power.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin provides this description of white policemen watching over speeches by members of the Nation of Islam in Harlem. He is surprised to see that, instead of jumping up and dragging away the speakers, the officers stood idly by, visibly afraid of the crowd's power. This fear immobilizes the policemen's authority, tipping the scales in a reversal so unexpected that Baldwin, as a compassionate person, almost feels pity for them, an impulse that once more illustrates his ability to make imaginative leaps of empathy even when it means inhabiting the viewpoint of his oppressors. Nonetheless, Baldwin relishes this reversal of what he explains is the typical dynamic, in which he is afraid of the policemen and has no recourse against their violence, cruelty, and condescension.

And all this is happening in the richest and freest country in the world, and in the middle of the twentieth century. The subtle and deadly change of heart that might occur in you would be involved with the realization that a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked but only that they be spineless.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes on the heels of a portion of text in which Baldwin implores his readers to imagine returning from war as a black soldier and being treated as something less than human. He conjectures that, if a soldier came back from risking his life for his country only to ride segregated buses and endure other debasements, the man might have a "deadly change of heart," and this change of heart would be due to the sudden realization that his country is a terrible place full of evil and wickedness. In turn, Baldwin suggests that the United States has been ruined by complacent and weak-willed citizens unwilling to take up the fight for racial equality. These people, it can be seen, are "spineless[ly]" willing to allow even black soldiers to suffer injustices, a clear demonstration of the arrogant thanklessness of Baldwin's countrymen.

For the horrors of the American Negro's life there has been almost no language. The privacy of his experience, which is only beginning to be recognized in language, and which is denied or ignored in official and popular speech—hence the Negro idiom—lends credibility to any system that pretends to clarify it. And, in fact, the truth about the black man, as a historical entity and as a human being, *has* been hidden from him, deliberately and cruelly; the power of the white world is threatened whenever a black man refuses to accept the white world's definitions. So every attempt is made to cut that black man down [...]. Who, then, is to say with authority where the root of so much anguish and evil lies?

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In thinking about the Nation of Islam and its religious beliefs, Baldwin finds himself ruminating on the idea that all white people are devils. To do so, he considers the importance of language and the invisibility of the African-American experience, an experience that has been stifled by a lack of recognition in storytelling and everyday conversation. This, he argues, is in keeping with the fact that even black history has been "hidden" from black people; instead of learning their own history, black people have been forced to accept the white version, which doesn't accurately represent them. This, Baldwin asserts, makes it very difficult to pinpoint "where the root of so much anguish and evil lies," meaning that it might very well be the case that

evil began with the rise of white people (as the Nation of Islam maintains). It's worth noting, of course, that Baldwin doesn't truly believe that all white people are devils, but he does support some of the Nation of Islam's underlying ideas.

> It is only "the so-called American Negro" who remains trapped, disinherited, and despised, in a nation that has kept him in bondage for nearly four hundred years and is still unable to recognize him as a human being. And the Black Muslims, along with many people who are not Muslims, no longer wish for a recognition so grudging and (should it ever be achieved) so tardy. Again, it cannot be denied that this point of view is abundantly justified by American Negro history. It is galling indeed to have stood so long, hat in hand, waiting for Americans to grow up enough to realize that you do not threaten them.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), Elijah Muhammad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin scrutinizes in this passage Elijah Muhammad's belief that no set of people can earn respect if they don't own the land they live on. Drawing yet again on the historical position of African-Americans, Baldwin agrees that it is certainly the case that black people in America represent a rare group of people who, despite having lived somewhere so long, can claim so little as their own. It is important to recognize that Baldwin is yet again allowing himself to consider a doctrine that goes against his beliefs, for he is not a member of the Nation of Islam. Nonetheless, in this moment he is able to find truth in what Elijah sets forth, a fact that speaks to his inquisitive, intellectual nature.

> It was very strange to stand with Elijah for those few moments, facing those vivid, violent, so problematical streets. I felt very close to him, and really wished to be able to love and honor him as a witness, an ally, and a father. I felt that I knew something of his pain and his fury, and, yes, even his beauty. Yet precisely because of the reality and the nature of those streets—because of what he conceived as his responsibility and what I took to be mine—we would always be strangers, and possibly, one day, enemies.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), Elijah Muhammad

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Having deflected—however politely—Elijah's attempts to convince him of the Nation of Islam's core tenets, Baldwin finds himself for several strange moments surveying the troubled streets of South Chicago with Elijah before leaving the mansion. The fact that he feels close to this man and that he wants to "honor him as a witness, an ally, and a father" speaks to the extent to which Baldwin registers authority and its influence on him—to be sure, he is incredibly attuned to power dynamics.

Baldwin's desire to be close to Elijah also illustrates the fact that the two men share many of the same worries—their differences lie in how they go about addressing those worries. As they look out, the streets begin to take on significance, for they represent the most notable difference between the two men; on the one hand, Elijah wants to rescue the inhabitants of these streets by mobilizing them against white America. Baldwin, on the other hand, wants to unify the people of those streets *with* white America. And because these two visions clash, it is possible that Baldwin and Elijah might someday become enemies.

> How can one, however, dream of power in any other terms than in the symbols of power? The boy could see that freedom depended on the possession of land; he was persuaded that, in one way or another, Negroes must achieve this possession. In the meantime, he could walk the streets and fear nothing, because there were millions like him, coming soon, now, to power. He was held together, in short, by a dream—though it is just as well to remember that some dreams come true—and was united with his "brothers" on the basis of their color. Perhaps one cannot ask for more. People always seem to band together in accordance to a principle that has nothing to do with love, a principle that releases them from personal responsibility.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), Nation of Islam Driver

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Baldwin shares the thoughts he had while driving away from Elijah Muhammad's mansion with a young member of the Nation of Islam. This driver tried to convince Baldwin that African-Americans were powerful enough to separate from white America, a point Baldwin countered with the observation that the power of black people is relative to the country in its current form—if African-Americans formed a separate nation, the foundation of their power would shift entirely. The young man had no response. Nonetheless, Baldwin gives him the benefit of the doubt, conceding that it is impossible to "dream of power in any other terms than in the symbols of power." His choice of words when he says that the driver was "held together" by a "dream" insinuates just how fragile people can be in the face of oppression, the words "held together" suggesting a certain desperate and delicate quality. A true humanist and empathetic soul, Baldwin recognizes this fragility and allows the young man to indulge his unstable dream.

> But in order to change a situation one has first to see it for what it is: in the present case, to accept the fact, whatever one does with it thereafter, that the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not belong to any other—not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam. The paradox—and a fearful paradox it is—is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker), Nation of Islam Driver

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes after Baldwin expresses his wish that the Nation of Islam would invest itself in affecting meaningful change in black communities by grappling with the concrete reality of the present, rather than by imagining an escapist, separatist future. Though Baldwin acknowledges the injustice of black Americans needing to engage with the very nation that has oppressed them for so long, he vehemently argues that there is no other way for black Americans to liberate themselves and create social change. Black Americans, in other words, must contend with the country's racist history and present, rather than indulging fantastical and abstract solutions that might seem more just, but are certainly less feasible. According to Baldwin, the Nation of Islam's goals are too abstract and too closely resemble the black-and-white thinking embodied by the Christian church, which ignores America's turbulent and complex history. Once again, Baldwin invests himself in the idea that an acknowledgement and acceptance of history will enable black people to defy their limitations.

> Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be. One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself—that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin suggests that white Americans are wrong when they assume that African-Americans hope to be given something, such as freedom. History has taught black people in the United States not to expect to be given anything. Ironically, the thing white Americans cling to so closely in an effort to "guard and keep" is their own identity, which they don't actually fully possess to begin with. When Baldwin says that white people are actually guarding and keeping "their system of reality," he means that they are protecting the narrative they've meticulously created about themselves. To be sure, white people in America are too fearful of losing their identities to be able to ever give anything to African-Americans, a fact black people know all to well.

> In any event, the sloppy and fatuous nature of American good will can never be relied upon to deal with hard problems. These have been dealt with, when they have been dealt with at all, out of necessity, and in political terms, anyway, necessity means concessions made in order to stay on top.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explains Baldwin's provocative contention that the 1954 bill outlawing segregated public schools was done only for political reasons, so that America would look good on the world stage (specifically, to prevent African nations from turning to America's Cold War enemies). Calling American goodwill "fatuous" (or foolish and pointless), Baldwin's critique of the country's inability to address "hard problems" underscores the United States' pathetic failure to address racial issues on the human grounds of love and compassion. Rather, America seems to have only ever confronted such problems if the resolutions present some kind of benefit to the power structures already in place. Therefore, Baldwin sees American "goodwill" as cynical and vapid, and he argues that no Americans should believe that the nation's goodwill is a sufficient force to address hard problems.

> Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the *fact* of death—ought to decide, indeed, to *earn* one's death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life. One is responsible to life: It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we shall return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

By listing the various institutions and entities that exist to distract us from "all the beauty of our lives," Baldwin shows just how many preoccupations humankind has invented to give the illusion that one can "deny the fact of death." This wide-ranging array—coupled with Baldwin's sudden and lofty rumination on life's fleeting nature—puts the pettiness of race, dangerous as it unfortunately is, into perspective. How wasteful and silly it is, Baldwin seems to be saying, that people spend so much time arguing about race and throwing themselves headlong into "steeples" and "mosques" and "nations" when they could be focusing on the joy inherent to life—focusing, in the end, on how to ensure that this joy still exists when history moves to the next generation.

> It is for this reason that love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided. Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth. And I submit, then, that the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy—on the contrary, indeed—and are involved only symbolically with color.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

The "reason" Baldwin refers to at the beginning of this passage is the confounding fact that white Americans do not want to be seen or judged by black people, and yet they simultaneously yearn for black people to look at them and show them recognition. In keeping with his argument throughout *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin suggests that love is the only thing capable of remedying this peculiar affliction, since it "takes off the masks" that people think they can't "live without" and know they can't "live within." By arguing that America's race problem is "involved only symbolically with color," Baldwin essentially proposes that the prevailing racial paradigms are mutable, for symbolism can be interpreted and reinterpreted through language, a process that would itself bring whites and blacks together.

[...] this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful. I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is certainly as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are.

Related Characters: James Baldwin (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Baldwin says this in regards to the African-American's embattled journey to establish identity and self-worth in the United States. He depicts this process as one of revision and constant renewal, since the struggle is to "achieve," "reveal," and then "confirm" the black identity. It is through this process, then—this process that is so involved and hyperactive because of its many racist obstacles—that African-Americans "grow up" and "discover who they are." This is a perfect example of Baldwin's belief that one must acknowledge and accept the circumstances of his or her life in order to change it; by viewing "suffering" as something that can be used to gain strength, he demonstrates what it might look like to optimistically work toward amelioration within a difficult context.

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.

MY DUNGEON SHOOK

Baldwin begins by telling his nephew James that he has tried to write this letter five times, but has torn up each attempt. He confides that James's face keeps appearing in his mind's eye as he starts to write, an image that also evokes memories of Baldwin's brother, the boy's father.

The fact that Baldwin has had trouble putting these words to paper indicates how much he cares about the letter's content. By evoking the faces of his father and his brother, he calls attention to the ever-present importance of history and family lineage, a motif that figures greatly into discussions of race in America.

Drawing a comparison between James and Baldwin's brother, Baldwin calls the boy and the boy's father "tough," "moody," and quick to appear "truculent" (or aggressively self-assertive) in order to avoid being perceived as soft or weak. Baldwin thinks that James has inherited this from his grandfather (Baldwin's father), whom the boy never met and who was bitter because he "really believed what white people said about him." Because of this, the old man became overly "holy." James, on the other hand, shows no inclination toward religion or holiness because he is part of "another era," an era that Baldwin describes metaphorically, explaining that the African-Americans of this era left "the land" and came upon what the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier once called "the cities of destruction."

Again calling upon James's forebears, Baldwin holds his own father up as an example of a black man defeated by white authority. Believing what white people said about him, Baldwin's father retreated into religious life, the church ultimately functioning as yet another form of authority. Baldwin mentions "the cities of destruction," a reference to the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's belief that, despite the early 20th-century notion that African-Americans should move to cities in order to prosper, urban centers only threatened to tear apart the black nuclear family. The fact that James is part of a generation that originated in these cities gives him a new vantage point from which he can more realistically assess issues of race and oppression, at least in comparison to his grandfather.

Baldwin remarks that he has known both his brother and James for the entirety of their lives. He watched his brother be carried in his father's arms, has kissed him and spanked him, has watched him learn how to walk. Knowing somebody for so long, Baldwin says, gives you a certain understanding of the passing of time and the different ways people develop, especially through pain. When he looks at his brother, he sees an amalgamation of personal history and agony embedded even in the man's laughter. He recognizes the influence of the oppression that America has inflicted upon his brother, calling this a "crime" and accusing his **country** and "countrymen" of "destroying hundreds of thousands of lives" and remaining unwilling to admit or even recognize it. He argues that the people inflicting this kind of damage cannot be allowed to think of themselves as innocent, for "it is the innocence which constitutes the crime."

Here again, Baldwin calls attention to the power of understanding one's history. This unrelenting historical gaze demonstrates the importance of remembering past suffering in order to comprehend present-day struggles. Knowing the tangible ways white America has influenced his brother's life, Baldwin turns his attention to the innocent attitude white people automatically assume. This false sense of innocence is created by white peoples' unwillingness to recognize the harm they and their ancestors have inflicted upon African-Americans. As long as this outlook continues, white people will be able to carry on with destruction, Baldwin maintains.

Baldwin anticipates that the "innocents" reading this letter will call him "bitter" for putting for such difficult, pessimistic ideas, but he declares that he isn't writing the letter to them—he's writing it to James. And in doing so, he takes it upon himself to teach the young boy how to deal with these sorts of people (these "innocents"), because they refuse to truly acknowledge James's very existence.

In this moment, Baldwin refuses to pander to white society. Instead of concerning himself with making white people comfortable, he strives to show James the reality of the situation, which is that, because of the color of his skin, white America does not accept him or acknowledge his worth.

Baldwin points out to James that, when James was born, his parents and grandmother had every reason to despair; they had brought yet another precious human being into a world that would refuse to accept him. But they *didn't* despair; James arrived ready "to be loved" and thus strengthened them "against the loveless world." Baldwin acknowledges how sinister—how truly bad—things must look from James's perspective these days, but he reminds James that the day he was born also was grim and that, despite all the hardship, they have not stopped loving each other, which is the only means of survival. And Baldwin tells his beloved nephew that now he must survive for the sake of the generations coming after him.

The concept of love emerges in this moment as a salvaging force of hope, as something that might carry James through the racism and structural oppression he is sure to encounter. Furthermore, Baldwin's preoccupation with history takes on a new element when he tells James that he must survive for the sake of his future children. Suddenly the idea of lineage and history becomes not only a useful tool of the past, but also a way of projecting hope and resilience into the future.

James is destined to fail in America, Baldwin writes. The "innocent **country**" is designed to enforce limitations upon him. This is because he is black, and Baldwin emphasizes that this is indeed the *only* reason. The "ghettos" into which James has been thrust are meant to dictate what he can and cannot do, and any aspirations are met with discouragement. In short, James is expected to "make peace with mediocrity" instead of striving for greatness. Again, Baldwin anticipates that white people will disagree with this hard truth by arguing that he is exaggerating the country's racial circumstances, but he makes clear that these people don't know the black experience. James, on the other hand, *does* know this experience and therefore understands its limitations, a fact that makes it possible to transcend them. "If you know whence you came," Baldwin counsels, "there is really no limit to where you can go."

Yet again, Baldwin underlines the great power that lies in understanding one's history—both personal and cultural. In this case, knowing the limitations of being a black man in America includes not only recognizing the influence of the past, but also identifying and acknowledging the current barriers and refusing to acquiesce to them.

Again, Baldwin stresses how important it is that James not believe what white people say about him. Any nasty belief they try to advance about him is not evidence of some undesirable aspect of his being, but rather a reflection of their own insecurities and indecency. Baldwin urges James not to think that there is any reason for him to strive to be accepted by white people. Similarly, there is no reason that white people should believe that they must accept black people. Rather, James must find a way to accept *them*, and to do so with love, "for these innocent people have no other hope." Baldwin maintains that such people are operating helplessly in a history they don't understand, a history that tells them to blindly believe black people are inferior to white people.

Although black people must acknowledge their limiting circumstances, Baldwin argues that they must not believe—or invest in—the supposed reasons driving their oppression. Because white people refuse to examine their embattled history—a history that plainly exposes their ugly prejudices—they are helpless and unable to come to terms even with themselves. Black people, on the other hand, are very much aware of America's history (since they have suffered through it) and thus must help their Caucasian countrymen in understanding their position in this country. Again, Baldwin tells James that this must be executed with love, reinforcing the idea that love can be put to use for the benefit of the country.

There are, of course, white people who know that black people aren't inferior, but Baldwin says they rarely act on this belief. He tells James that if white Americans were to commit themselves to the task of eradicating inequality, they would be risking the loss of their own identity as they know it. Baldwin uses a metaphor to illustrate this point; he asks James to imagine waking up one morning to find "the sun shining and all the stars aflame." He says that black people in America have served as a constant—a fixed and unchanging star in the sky. As this star begins to move after so many years of immobility, "heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."

The white people who have staked their own identities on the oppression of black people lose their sense of reality as black people slowly defy the limitations placed upon them. The unwillingness of white people (even those who understand racism) to commit themselves to remedying America's racial problem belies a great fear of losing hold of who they think they are, since they've so long defined themselves in relation to the debasement of black people.

Be that as it may, Baldwin reminds his nephew that even these ignorant white people are his brothers. If integration is ever to be successful, it will mean that black people—with love—force these brothers to "see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it." Baldwin reminds James that he comes from a long line of tough, brave people who "picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads" and overcame seemingly insurmountable hardships in highly respectable ways. James is the descendant, Baldwin informs him, of some of the greatest poets in history, one of whom once said, "*The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.*"

The quote included in this passage is taken from a slave spiritual. This is significant because it serves as yet another reminder to James that he is the descendant of a severely oppressed people. But even so, this lyric embodies optimism even in the face of the harshest form of degradation, showing that even the very structures of captivity—a "dungeon" and "chains"—sometimes fall away and yield to freedom.

Ending the letter, Baldwin tells James that, as they both know, "the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon." He concludes by asserting that, in order for black people to be free, white people must also be free.

Though Baldwin's assessment that freedom has not yet been won may seem pessimistic, the unifying sentiment he sets forth when he says that white people must be free in order for black people to be free brings with it a certain kind of optimism that is, at its core, involved with the process of using love to bring black and white people together.

DOWN AT THE CROSS

In the summer of his fourteenth year, Baldwin went through what he refers to as a "prolonged religious crisis." He writes that he discovered God and, therefore, became more intimate with the notion of Hell. Having been raised in a Christian society, he easily accepted God and quickly began to associate religion with safety, an association he believes is common in the United States. Putting this in different terms, Baldwin says that when he turned 14, he became afraid for the first time in his life.

The fact that Baldwin conflated religion with safety says something about the circumstances in which he sought the church. From the beginning of this essay, then, it becomes clear that Baldwin (as a teenager) was trying to escape something. As such, it is no surprise that he quickly began to associate religion with fear.

Baldwin feared the evil lurking within as well as the evil all around him. Suddenly he began to regard the "whores and pimps and racketeers on the Avenue" in a new way—without warning, they now embodied what Baldwin could himself become. They had, after all, been created by the very same circumstances from which Baldwin himself emerged. His friends had started flocking to the streets to drink and do drugs, and his father believed that Baldwin was going to follow them. Meanwhile, girls he had known his entire life—girls who had sung in **the church**—went through puberty and became alluring. Not entirely unlike the criminals on the Avenue, these girls became "unutterably different and fantastically *present*." Because of the way he had been brought up in a Christian household and **nation**, Baldwin believed his attraction to these girls rendered him evil and depraved, a feeling that was intensified by the fact that the girls appeared to appreciate and encourage the kind of behavior he found so worthy of guilt.

It is worth noting that, while Baldwin joined the church in order to escape the things he was afraid of on the streets of Harlem, religion seemed to clarify and intensify his fears, sharpening the notion of sin and therefore further making him feel "depraved" in his attraction to the girls around him.

As Baldwin's peers all careened into adolescence, he noticed that the girls quickly developed a religious sense of right and wrong, whereas the boys slouched into a kind of reticent despair as they acquiesced to the harsh realities of black adulthood. At the time, Baldwin thought that they were letting themselves go, or—in a sense—giving up, resigning to the fact that they would "rise no higher than their fathers." It became clear that education was futile for them, so the boys started dropping out of school and going to work. Although Baldwin's father encouraged him to do the same, Baldwin refused to do so, despite the fact that he already understood that even highly educated black men were mostly incapable of succeeding in America.

The notion of absolute authority emerges in this passage when Baldwin writes about realizing that black adolescent males were destined to "rise no higher than their fathers." And with this idea of authority comes an inkling of the limitations placed on black people and especially, in this case, black men. The thought that he could go no further than his father seems to have frightened Baldwin, compelling him to retaliate against the man's wishes.

Slowly but surely, Baldwin's male friends began to neglect the way they looked, often standing in small clusters in dark hallways, passing around wine or whiskey and hanging out, cursing and fighting and sometimes openly weeping. They were, Baldwin writes, "unable to say what it was that oppressed them, except that they knew it was 'the man'—the white man." Helplessly trapped in a cycle of oppression, these boys didn't have the means to address their own subjugation.

Because white authority can be so elusive, it is difficult to address. In noticing his peers' inability to articulate the nature of their troubles, Baldwin exhibited an early understanding of the fact that one must understand his or her historical and present circumstances in order to ameliorate his or her situation. Although he may not have been able to voice this idea as a teenager, his gravitation to the church indicated an unwillingness to unequivocally accept oppression.

Baldwin recounts his own run-ins with "the man": once, when he was downtown as a thirteen-year-old, he was crossing the street when a police officer said, "Why don't you niggers stay uptown where you belong?" And another time, when he was ten, two officers frisked him while making remarks about his ancestry and sexual abilities, leaving him flat on his back in an empty parking lot in Harlem.

In relating his experiences with racist policemen, Baldwin makes the image of white authority specific and particular, thereby rescuing it from the vagueness that makes it so difficult to combat.

The church helped Baldwin avoid crime, which all of a sudden presented itself "not as *a* possibility but as *the* possibility." The overwhelming reality seemed to be that nobody could overcome oppression by working and playing by the rules; rather, the ability to inspire fear in others was the only thing that might keep a black person safe. Out of this, Baldwin posits that very few black people care about being accepted by white people. Instead, they merely hope to avoid being beaten down. When white people learn to accept and love themselves, he says, "the Negro problem" will cease to exist because white people will no longer need it.

The fact that crime presented itself as the primary possibility in Baldwin's life illustrates the narrow scope of what is made available to black people in America. By closing off opportunities for upward mobility, white Americans set black people up to affirm white stereotypes and prejudices, namely that African-Americans are dangerous criminals. If white Americans simply learned to love themselves, Baldwin believes, this cycle would prove itself unnecessary, because white identity would no longer be based on the notion of black inferiority.

Though white people may not believe that these are the conditions under which black people really live, Baldwin maintains that it is overwhelmingly clear for someone like him—who has experienced such oppression—that whites do not treat blacks as they would like to be treated themselves. As far back as slavery, when black slaves and servants had to steal from the whites' homes in order to balance the scales, white people have not lived by the Christian values by which they claim to adhere. When a black person does something—such as steal from a slave master's house—to make up for this inequality, white people use it to their advantage, holding it up as an example of how whites are ultimately superior.

Here again, Baldwin touches on the idea that white Americans, in an attempt to believe in their own innocence, refuse to acknowledge the country's racist realities. If they are to go on oppressing African-Americans while believing they are perfectly moral human beings, it is necessary that they remain willfully ignorant of their failure to pass along the Christian values to which they so desperately cling. And by setting up a system that encourages black people to break the law, they effectively protect and secure their superior societal position.

As such, Baldwin began to see as a teenager that a life of crime would be harder to avoid than he had previously thought. And even while he was so determined to not allow white people to debase him and limit his prospects, he could find no way of effectively avoiding it. He points out that every black boy in his situation eventually reaches this same realization and that, in order to survive, the boy must find a "thing" or "gimmick" in which to invest himself. It does not matter, Baldwin says, what that gimmick is—for him, it was **the church**.

The "gimmick" Baldwin refers to gives young black people a false sense of hope that they might succeed in stepping outside the cycle of oppression kept in motion by white people. That it doesn't matter what this gimmick is proves that this method of escaping racial paradigms is ineffective, making clear that whatever a black adolescent throws him- or herself into is merely a distraction, not a means of total escape.

The point at which a black boy must throw himself into a gimmick coincides with an "awakening" of the "senses," or a certain coming into oneself. Unfortunately, for African-Americans this is often experienced under negative circumstances, as the very reason a boy must invest himself in something is to avoid the perils of his racial situation. Baldwin bemoans the fact that "the awakening of one's senses should lead to such a merciless judgment of oneself." He writes that black people in America are taught early in their lives to hate themselves because white people supposedly hold all **the nation**'s power and superiority.

Baldwin's consideration of the "gimmick" allows him to show how sad it is—on a personal level—that so many young Americans have virtually no chance to learn to respect themselves. All of the black adolescent's energies are quickly devoted to finding something that might distract from his or her "merciless judgment" of him- or herself, a judgment forced upon the impressionable teen by the very country he or she is supposed to be part of. This is certainly one reason why Baldwin stresses the importance of love.

Baldwin believes that when a black child is scolded, there is a "sudden, uncontrollable note of fear heard in his mother's or his father's voice," especially when the child has transgressed some kind of racial boundary. For example, when Baldwin's father reprimanded him for believing he could do anything a white boy could do, there was a clear strain of fear that was entirely different from the everyday kind of parental worry a white parent might exhibit. Baldwin says that there are various filters of authority that travel through black parents and reach children. And although the children can't always exactly pinpoint the knowledge of racial injustice inherent in their parents' tone, they begin to intuit the power of this nameless, all-encompassing white authority.

The fact that this vast white authority is so intuitively but inarticulately perceived reinforces Baldwin's previous remark about his wayward friends who were unable to understand how exactly they were being oppressed. That these filters of authority make their way to black children at such a young age makes it easy to see why white dominance is so vague and difficult to address even in a black person's adult years.

Baldwin says that he ignored his father's fear by telling himself that the man was "very old-fashioned." Nonetheless, the summer Baldwin joined **the church**, all of these fears, which had been slowly cultivating throughout his childhood, rose up and confronted him.

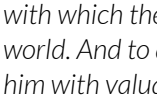
Even in trying to discount his father—who is, notably, the most immediate figure of authority—Baldwin found himself unable to keep fear from taking hold of him.

Baldwin didn't join **the church** that his father preached in. Instead, he allowed his best friend from school to take him to another church one Saturday afternoon, where he met a female pastor in the back room. A respected woman in the community, she sat there in her robes and smiled at him, asking, "Whose little boy are you?" Baldwin was taken aback by the fact that this question was exactly what the pimps and other criminals on the Avenue used to ask when they encouraged him to "hang out" with them. Baldwin reasons that this question probably disarmed him so successfully because he actually *did* want to belong to somebody. It was inevitable, he thinks, that somebody would claim him that summer. Lucky for him, it was the pastor and not one of the criminals.

As previously mentioned, the most immediate authority figure in Baldwin's life was his father, so it comes as no surprise that he joined a different church. It is ironic, though, that this act of relative defiance merely led him into the hands of yet another authority figure, who in turn could have been easily substituted with one of the criminals on the Avenue. The interchangeability of these figures proves Baldwin's notion that black children and teenagers face multiple forms of authority.

As the summer continued, Baldwin grew more and more afraid and felt increasingly guilty. One night, after a sermon, he fell to floor of **the church**, landing in front of the altar. It was entirely unexpected—he had been singing and clapping and thinking about a play he was writing, and then suddenly he was on the ground staring at the lights overhead and the saints on the church's high walls. He remembers pain and the feeling that he was yelling up to heaven and receiving no reply, which led to a hopelessness, since the one thing he had invested himself in (religion) refused to acknowledge his experience, just like everybody else. In America, Baldwin writes, even black people refuse to look at one another, because they are always looking up or down, anywhere but at one another (and white people, of course, look in the entirely opposite direction). In this way, it is nearly impossible to have any hope in the idea of communion.

Baldwin's guilt seems to be emphasized rather than diminished by the church. This is likely because of the "hopelessness" he felt in the face of religion. The metaphor he uses of everybody looking in different directions rather than at one another is in keeping with the idea that all young black people must eventually seek out a gimmick with which they can distract themselves from the oppressive white world. And to add to the fact that the church failed to fully provide him with valuable human connection, even the gods he was supposed to worship appeared ambivalent about his troubles.



The universe, Baldwin maintains, consists of "other people." When these people are constantly refusing to look at one another—as is the case for African-Americans—only God is left to turn to. But as he lay on the floor of **the church**, Baldwin realized that this God—a God he was looking to for salvation and support—was white and, despite the fact that He was supposed to love all of His children, He neglected black people. This was utterly perplexing to Baldwin, and his experience passing out during the church service did nothing to show him evidence of God's love; when he was finally rejuvenated the next morning, he was told that he was "saved."

This incident marks the turning point for Baldwin in the Christian church. It is ironic that he was supposedly "saved" after his experience of falling to the ground during a service, for this moment seems to have only strengthened his growing religious misgivings. His realization that God is white and not entirely beneficent further revealed to him that his investment in the church had less to do with real spiritual proclivities than it had to do with the importance of finding a gimmick to distract himself from his own oppression.

In a way, Baldwin really did feel saved by this experience. Finally, he felt free of all the guilt he had been feeling. It wasn't until much later in his life that he found himself capable of asking why "human relief" came only as a result of such strange and outdated suffering. He realized then, in later years, that all Christian **churches** (black or white) revolved around the same tenets: blindness, loneliness, and terror, wherein the first (blindness) made it impossible to fully recognize the existence of the last two. And although he would like to say that the Christian church's values were faith, hope, and charity, he finds it impossible to believe this.

Baldwin's retrospective account of "saving" is characterized by a clear skepticism; he doesn't seem to really believe *that he'd rid himself of all his guilt, though perhaps at the time—in the direct aftermath of his "saving"—he was able to convince himself that, because he fell to the ground, he had released all of his fears. That he views his saving as an outdated form of suffering indicates his belief that he was, in that moment, playing into a very old narrative about human nature—a religious one that he later found himself capable of examining and seeing beyond.*

Despite the fact that he'd been "saved," Baldwin quickly understood he wouldn't last long in **the church** and that, in order to avoid becoming too bored and joining the criminals on the Avenue, he needed to find something within the church to take up his attention and time. In keeping with this—and to challenge his father, who was also a preacher—he decided to become a Young Minister.

By becoming a Young Minister, Baldwin essentially found a gimmick within a gimmick: finding the church lacking in its ability to distract him from and lift him out of oppression, he became even more invested in the institution.

The fact that Baldwin was preaching at such a young age gave him an advantage over his father, which he leveraged as much as possible. For the first time, he had a valid excuse to ignore his father as he wrote sermons and prepared for services. Although this power over his father was actually quite frightening to him, he used his newfound freedom extensively, often spending whole days in preparation without interruption. He felt, finally, that he had "immobilized" his father. It wasn't until much later, though, that he realized he had also immobilized himself.

The religious means by which Baldwin upended his father's authority were, for the most part, the same means his father had used to wield authority over him in the first place. What's more, Baldwin regards his investment in religion as nothing more than a commitment to a gimmick, an outlet that gave him false hope. This is why he believes that, in immobilizing his father, he also immobilized himself, for religion was an ineffective way of gaining actual power and freedom.

Being part of **the church** was an incredibly influential experience for Baldwin, who writes that he has never been able to fully let go of the music and drama and rejoicing. There is, he believes, a distinct sense of community that comes from the religious notion of suffering, and the opportunity to enrapture an entire audience during a sermon remains one of the most exciting experiences of his entire life. When he preached, Baldwin felt that he was taking on the pain and joy of his listeners and that they, in turn, took on his. Consumed entirely by this sensation, Baldwin worked tirelessly as a Young Minister to commune with Jesus, who he thought "knew all the secrets of [his] heart."

That Baldwin gives credit to certain elements of the church shows his ability to hold two ideas in mind at once. Indeed, he is a writer who weighs every consideration, even those that contradict one another. Although he has already made clear that the church often fails to bring people together, here he admits that religious services can, on occasion, inspire a wonderful kind of communion in which the members of the congregation help shoulder each other's burdens.

Baldwin marks the slow disintegration of his faith as coinciding with his blossoming interest in literature. After a year of preaching, he started reading Dostoevsky while attending a mostly Jewish high school. The fact that he was constantly around Jews meant that he was spending the majority of his time with people who his religion believed were "beyond any hope of salvation." In trying to convince them of Christianity's truth, he showed them pamphlets—in response, they merely pointed out that the Gospels were written long after Christ's death, an observation that encouraged Baldwin to read his texts more closely, realizing that the authors of the Bible were simply men who—like Baldwin himself in the throes of preparing a sermon—were likely to attribute their passionate imaginations to divine inspiration. Moreover, Baldwin realized, these men were white.

It seems Baldwin's tendency to dutifully consider opposing viewpoints was present in his personality even when he was a teenager; his patient and curious perception of Jews—people his church community had given him no reason to respect—led him to examine his own beliefs. Rather than closing himself off to new ideas, Baldwin showed himself to be inquisitive and thorough. And as a result, when he interrogated his religion, he found its logic lacking, for he couldn't ignore that the authors of the Bible may not have accepted him as a follower.

Once, after Baldwin's best friend—who was Jewish—came over to his house, his father asked whether or not the boy was "saved." When Baldwin told his father that his friend was Jewish, his father slapped him across the face. In that moment, Baldwin felt "all the hatred and all the fear" rising in him, manifesting itself in a "merciless resolve" to kill his father before his father could kill him. He suddenly felt that all his preaching and religious rejoicing had changed nothing at all about his relationship with his father. After all, why should he take pride in the fact that his best friend was going to languish in Hell, as his father seemed to want? This encouraged him to consider the Holocaust in Germany, and he realized that the Jewish people were indeed still persecuted and that his best friend could well have been one of the many who died in the travesty.

Again, Baldwin exhibited a compassion for people who lived on the other side of supposed enemy lines. He felt that his time in the church hadn't, in the end, changed his relationship with his father, because in this moment he realized that he had not—or perhaps could not—overcome his father's authority, at least not by using religion. Furthermore, the Holocaust proved to him the futility of religion, for it was the ultimate example of how the divisive us-versus-them thinking religion often promotes can easily lead to senseless violence and oppression.

Responding to his father's slap, Baldwin said: "He's a better Christian than you are," and left the house. From that point on, the tension between him and his father was more out in the open, and this was a relief.

By putting the tension with his father out in the open, Baldwin perhaps found it easier to address. Much like the white authority that so successfully perplexed and oppressed Baldwin's young friends, his father's authority had heretofore remained vague and therefore untouchable.

Over time, Baldwin's restlessness in **the church** began to show. Because he didn't feel truly saved, it started to take considerable strength to refrain from cursing the congregation and telling them to trade in their religion for more tangible forms of hope, such as community organizing and striking. He no longer felt that he could teach children in Sunday school about the beneficence of a gentle savior, for this was like telling them they must accept their low station in life. Indeed, Baldwin found that there was no love in the church, as the congregations looked up to ministers who were primarily interested in money. Not only that, but religion seemed only to hide "hatred and self-hatred and despair," and any existing goodwill failed to move beyond church services and make its way into the community. Rather than loving everybody, Christianity appeared to implore its followers to only love like-minded people.

Once again, Baldwin depicts the church's unfortunate tendency to generate isolation and greed rather than unity and kindness. The fact that Christianity's virtues failed to spread into the community exposed a failure to extend love. This, for Baldwin, is perhaps the ultimate failure.

Meditating on the divisive nature of Christianity, Baldwin points out that, just as white people believe that black people are descended from Ham and are therefore destined to eternal slavery, black Christians believe white people are the descendants of Cain, a greedy killer.

These beliefs indicate yet again how black-and-white Baldwin finds religious thinking and how such doctrines can be interpreted and manipulated by anybody in search of power or superiority.

Nonetheless, Baldwin admits that the Christian **church** that he eventually left did indeed embody a rare joy and resilience. He wonders if perhaps everybody—the "pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children"—were unified by oppression, and thus were sometimes able to achieve something like love. This kind of unity is exactly what the United States needs, he argues. What stands in the way of this are "attitudes" that are chiefly historical—racist attitudes that have nothing to do with the present but that make it impossible to understand the nature of America's racial struggle. Based on these destructive historical attitudes, white people refuse to understand the experience of black people, therefore making it impossible for them to fully understand themselves.

Just as religious doctrine can be used by anyone to oppress others, Baldwin argues that religion—and even oppression itself—could be used to bring people together. Unfortunately, though, America's history has implemented certain societal structures, or "historical attitudes," that white people complacently adopt, and these attitudes make it impossible for them to recognize the fact that America could achieve racial unity. Instead, white Americans blindly form their identities around what they've long been told: that they are superior to African-Americans.

Focusing his attention more specifically on the history of Christianity, Baldwin illustrates the fact that **the church** has long been an agent of oppression, as early missionaries spreading the religion used Christian ideology to justify conquering other **nations**. These missionaries believed that conquest was an intrinsically good and pious endeavor; he calls this the "sanctification of power." As such, the spreading of the Gospel acted as an excuse for domination and the imposition of authority on nonwhite nations. Given this aggressive history, Baldwin argues that whoever seeks morality ought to remove him- or herself from the church. If God isn't capable of bringing people together unequivocally and granting freedom to everybody, then there is no use for Him.

By using religion as an excuse to conquer foreign lands, the idea of power became associated with holiness. Baldwin argues that this "sanctification of power" is responsible for the inherently oppressive "historical attitudes" white people in America so blindly assume. Even centuries later, the church advances extremely outdated notions about superiority, doing so under the guise of piety. As such, religion validates racist inclinations, rendering it an unfit agent of liberation or change.

At this point, Baldwin trains his focus on another religious group: the Nation of Islam. He writes that he had heard much about its leader, Elijah Muhammad, but had never paid the movement very much attention because he found its message all too familiar. Often in Harlem on Saturday nights he had come upon crowds listening to Muslims speak about white people. Soon, though, he began to listen more carefully because of the way police officers regarded such crowds: they were afraid, and this was something he'd never seen before. They stood idly by while speakers from the Nation of Islam held forth in front of large crowds, who were captivated and seemingly inspired. Baldwin saw that these speeches brought black people together and instilled in them something that looked like hope.

It is significant that the Nation of Islam frightened the white policemen, for this indicates that the officers sensed a certain power lurking in the organization, a power they most likely had not paid attention to in other black people or organizations. However, it's worth remembering that, although Baldwin believes inspiring fear in policemen can temporarily help black people avoid violence, it also plays into white America's stereotypes about African-Americans, ultimately reaffirming their sense of superiority.

These speeches revolved around what the Nation of Islam believed was both historical and religious proof that all white people are cursed devils whose end is near. According to their doctrine, this information had been passed down to Elijah Muhammad by Allah, who told him that white power would end in ten to fifteen years. Although Baldwin doesn't believe this himself, he makes a point of stating that this thinking is no more ludicrous than the white Christian belief that all black people are destined to slavery because they descended from Ham. And in any case, the Nation of Islam speeches he witnessed in Harlem did not spend much time discussing theology, since black people didn't need convincing that white people treated them badly; the audience was simply happy to have religious evidence that they had been mistreated for many years and that this was soon going to end.

Examining religion's us-versus-them model of thinking (this time from a new angle), Baldwin yet again shows his willingness to entertain viewpoints that differ from his own. By saying that the Nation of Islam's doctrine is no more unbelievable than that of Christianity, he once more shows himself to be a tolerant, considerate thinker.

Baldwin wonders why the massive audiences at these Nation of Islam speeches were suddenly willing to indulge this line of thinking. After all, he remarks, the theology was not new, nor was the sentiment. Nonetheless, Elijah somehow succeeded in bringing people together in a way that the Christian church was unable to do. Responding to his own question, he suggests that time has rendered black people more willing and able to accept these ideas. Back when the Christian church went into black countries and subjugated the people living there, it was impossible to believe in a black God. Since that time, though, the Christian church has shown itself to be morally corrupt time and again.

It was impossible to believe in a black God in the times of Christian conquest because the white conquerors, who were so powerful in their dominance, forced white theology down the throats of the newly subjugated. Now, though, the Nation of Islam's black audiences are ready—after so many years of oppression by the plainly unethical white church—to hear that there is a religious doctrine that might raise them *to power and, in doing so, give meaning to their previous suffering.*

Evoking the Holocaust once again, Baldwin demonstrates the injured moral positioning of the Christian **church**, since Germany was a Christian **nation**. "The fact of the Third Reich alone makes obsolete forever any question of Christian superiority," he writes. And though Christians of other nations were utterly confounded and surprised by Germany's violence against humanity, Baldwin argues that it was much less astounding to black people.

Baldwin's assertion that African-Americans were less taken aback by the Holocaust than white people is due to black Americans' troubled history. In other words, black people in America fully understood that a white Christian nation could be capable of horrific, discriminatory crimes because they had experienced it in a different form.

Baldwin examines the station of black Americans during World War II, illustrating the injustice of the fact that black men went to fight for their country and returned to still be treated as subhuman. This leads him into a personal story about a time he and two friends were denied alcohol at an airport bar. Even though all three men were over thirty, the bartender refused to serve them because they "looked too young." When they called the manager over, involuntarily drawing the entire bar's attention, they were finally given their drinks. Afterward, they unwillingly engaged in conversation with a naïve white man. When one of Baldwin's friends—a military veteran—told the man that the fight they had been having in the bar was, in fact, his responsibility too, the man replied, "I lost my conscience a long time ago," and left the bar. This kind of person is typical in America, and though Baldwin hated such people several years ago, now he pities them in order to avoid despising them.

In this moment, Baldwin uses kindness to keep himself from going to a dark place of resentment and hate, which he knows is unproductive and futile. Still, his tone here sounds disheartened by the idea that somebody could knowingly give up his conscience in order to live an easier life. This relates to his earlier thoughts about white people's innocence; when the man at the bar admitted that he had lost his conscience long ago, he was effectively acknowledging his complicity in propagating and sustaining racial oppression. The fact that this man seemed to have accepted his own lack of innocence depresses Baldwin, who would otherwise like to think that white complacency might be remedied by a recognition of complicity.

Baldwin returns to his examination of the Nation of Islam. He considers Malcolm X—the movement's second in command—and his idea that white people value violence insofar as it advances their own glory and rule. As soon as black people try to stand up for their rights, though, the idea of violence is perceived as senseless and brutal. Baldwin finds himself unable to call this theory untrue, though he disagrees with where this kind of thinking leads, as it essentially condones violence. Still, though, he admits that "things are as bad as the Muslims say they are," even if he disagrees with the Nation of Islam's black vs. white colorism that so closely recalls the racist underpinnings of the Christian church.

Malcolm X's idea about the difference between white and black violence draws yet again on the sanctification of power, this time adding complexity to the notion by suggesting that the white world perceives white conquest as fundamentally virtuous, whereas black conquest is held up as evidence of depravity and moral corruption.

Arriving at Elijah Muhammad's mansion—which doubled as the movement's headquarters—Baldwin felt nervous. He was late, he was unsure how he felt about the Nation of Islam, and he knew that he couldn't smoke or drink once inside the mansion. He writes that, by the time he reached the house, he felt "as deserving of a scolding as a schoolboy."

Baldwin's nervous sense of inferiority here evokes the power struggle he underwent with his father as a child, setting the grounds for Elijah Muhammad—this respected leader—to leverage his position of authority.

Upon entering the mansion, Baldwin's reservations deepened. Everyone present—and there was a sizeable group—treated him with respect, which he read as an indication that they expected something from him. Elijah was not in the room, and when he finally appeared, Baldwin noted the joy that surrounded this smiling figure who playfully teased the women present and greeted his disciples with laughter and conversation before turning to Baldwin with a smile that transported him back to the moment when the pastor had asked, "Whose little boy are you?" It was clear to him then that Elijah had the ability to draw people toward him, inviting them to unload their troubles onto him. Elijah reminded Baldwin of his father, if he and his father had been friends.

Elijah Muhammad's charismatic and relaxed way of donning power explicitly reminds Baldwin of his father, though it's worth noting that Baldwin says Elijah reminded him of his father if he and his father had been friends. *This indicates that, unlike when he was a child, Baldwin was more self-assured as an adult arriving at Elijah's mansion.*

Having seen him on a television program, Elijah told Baldwin that it seemed to him that Baldwin was not yet brainwashed and was trying to become himself, which Baldwin hesitantly agreed with, though he privately supposes that this meant two different things to Elijah and to him.

Elijah's comment about Baldwin's attempt to become himself was yet another move to solidify himself as an authority figure—an authority figure capable of assessing and making candid judgments about the author's character.

The dinner was filled with talk about power and about the "white devils." Elijah told Baldwin that the reason Baldwin didn't think all white people were devils was because he had spent too much time with them and was too "exposed to white teaching." Baldwin outlines Elijah's mission to "return 'the so-called Negro' to Islam, to separate the chosen of Allah from this doomed **nation**." According to the Nation of Islam, there was a time long, long ago when black people thrived on earth before white people even existed. After some time, though, the devil invented white people, and Allah conceded that these white devils could rule the world for a set amount of time. Now, though, according to the Nation of Islam, that time was coming to an end, and since there was nothing virtuous about white people, there was no true hope or use for their continued existence.

Elijah's belief that Baldwin has been too "exposed to white teaching" shows both his own dedication to keeping the races separate and *Baldwin's admirable ability to not remain trapped in his own perspective. Indeed, it is true that Baldwin has had much exposure to white people, but it is this very willingness to connect with people outside his circumstances that drove him to Elijah's mansion in the first place to hear talk about white devils and Allah and the Nation of Islam—none of which he believes himself, but all of which he is willing to consider.*

Yet again, Baldwin notes that there is nothing new about this sort of thinking: it is merely a reversal of white Christian ideology. And since the African-American experience has so long been denied visibility—because white people are reluctant to admit the travesties they've committed—it is difficult to say where the root of such racial problems lies. Why shouldn't it be possible then, Baldwin asks, that humanity began with perfect black people, especially since this mirrors the line of thinking advanced by white people about themselves?

Since Baldwin already thinks religion is the wrong way to approach the matter of race in America, he is perfectly happy to admit that the Nation of Islam's doctrines are no more outlandish or problematic than those of the Christian church. In advancing this idea, he also potentially stops nonreligious white people from condemning the Nation of Islam, thereby working to rescue more black people from vilification in the eyes of white Americans.

While having dinner with Elijah and his disciples, Baldwin found himself telling Elijah that he gave up religion for a reason and that he was, above all else, a writer. Elijah encouraged him to think about religion more often, but did not push too hard. It seemed to Baldwin in this moment that, though he wasn't ready to accept the Nation of Islam's doctrines, Elijah and his disciples were confident that he would eventually come around to joining them. This gave Baldwin the feeling that he was once again a teenager in his father's home.

Authority once more held over his head, Baldwin finds himself in this scene reduced to the equivalent of his younger self, which makes it all the more impressive that he is able to maintain his composure and keep hold of his own beliefs.

At one point, Elijah made the claim that no set of people were ever fully respected without having possessed their own land. Baldwin couldn't disagree with this, thinking that everybody other than African Americans has a **nation**. Only "the so-called American Negro" is "trapped, disinherited, and despised, in a nation that has kept him in bondage for nearly four hundred years."

The notion of the black American's highly unique existence adds new complexity to Baldwin's interest in history, setting the stage for the author to later consider the treatment of non-American black people.

Baldwin hypothetically considers what would happen if black people were able to claim the "six or seven" states the Nation of Islam believes America owes them by way of reparation for slavery, ultimately deciding that this redistribution of land would alienate white people and maroon them between nonwhite **nation**s. He writes that, if he were Muslim, he would certainly strive for this and wouldn't hesitate to do what he could to realize the vision, since, ultimately, there would be nothing to lose—if he "perished" in the process, so be it; "One has been perishing here so long!"

Baldwin's ability to imagine himself into the shoes of somebody with much different beliefs yet again comes to the surface when he suggests that if *he were Muslim, he would have no problem doing everything he could to execute the Nation of Islam's vision. He is especially able to empathetically project himself into this viewpoint because it intersects with something that he actually does believe: that the African-American has long suffered in America. Crucially, though, Baldwin refuses to act like he has nothing to lose, for he remains invested in salvaging and improving the America he knows.*

Further investigating the idea of separatism, Baldwin considers the notion of black pride, an attitude he says was once helplessly shouted into the void, unheard because of white oppression and ignorance. "*Yes*, I'm black, goddamnit, and I'm beautiful!" people used to declare to no avail. But now (during the Cold War), black really *has* become beautiful in the white eye, though not for the right reasons. Instead of gaining social currency due to love, blackness gained attention during the Cold War as a result of fear, since America was eager to stop the USSR from spreading communism to various African **nations**. Of course, the United States's pandering to non-American blacks was the ultimate insult to African-Americans still kept under the oppressive societal dictates of a post-slavery nation.

By considering non-American black people, the nations they belong to, and their influence in the Cold War, Baldwin widens his scope to show that fear of defeat by communism on the international stage ultimately propelled America to hide its racism. Here again, fear rather than love was used to affect change, but Baldwin has already made clear that love is the only real way to move forward. In keeping with this, he views America's attempt to make nice with non-American black people as a sort of pathetic pandering that African-Americans should take as an insult.

Leaving Elijah's mansion, Baldwin felt as though he had failed some sort of test. Standing outside with the leader and looking out upon the troubled streets of South Chicago, he wished he could show Elijah love and support.

Baldwin's fellow-feeling toward Elijah illustrates the strong allure of authority and the human tendency to want to belong to a group. At the heart of this sentiment lies the importance of human connection, a feeling Baldwin is capable of recognizing, regardless of what has inspired it.

In a car provided by the Nation of Islam to take him to his next destination—to have drinks with several white friends—Baldwin continued the night's conversation with a young dark man who insisted that African-Americans could prosper in an independently black **nation** because of the fact that they account for approximately twenty billion dollars' worth of America's economy. Baldwin countered by noting that this twenty billion dollars depends on the entirety of the United States's economy; in other words, it is relative to and dependent upon the current marketplace. What would happen, he wanted to know, when African-Americans removed themselves from this economy? The driver seemed annoyed and rather stumped by this line of thinking, and Baldwin backed off, though he wanted to say that the boy's frame of reference would have to shift if this sort of change were to take place.

Baldwin's assertion that the driver's frame of reference would have to shift if this change took place aligns with what he told his nephew James about the power of understanding one's history: "If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go." The problem with the driver's logic, then, was that he ignored the realities of his current situation by refusing to take into account the relationship between him and his white oppressors. Therefore, he didn't *seem to know from whence he came and, as such, there* were *actual limitations to where he could go.*

Although Baldwin was quickly able to identify the flaws in his driver's logic, he admits that he understands why the young man indulged such thinking. He sees that the boy depended on a dream of sorts, a reliance on the unity of the Nation of Islam—and who could hold this against him?

Baldwin's sympathy to the driver's error circles back to his understanding of the human desire to be part of a larger group, especially if this group is held together by a common dream that whispers of freedom.

Although he is considerate of what might lead people of the Nation of Islam to think in such optimistic—and perhaps even unrealistic terms—Baldwin expresses that he wishes the Muslims had started a movement that could inspire disenfranchised African-Americans to seek change by way of concrete action. In order to change their situation, Baldwin maintains that black people have to recognize and accept the fact that "the Negro has been formed by this **nation**, for better or for worse."

It comes as no surprise that Baldwin favors practical action over the wishful thinking of groups like the Nation of Islam. This harkens all the way back to when he used to have to refrain from telling his congregation to organize rent strikes instead of sitting in church listening to sermons. Once again, he presents religion as something that too often keeps black people from coming to terms with their circumstances—something he deems necessary in order to affect real change.

Baldwin takes up the question of where the Nation of Islam receives its money from, a topic shrouded in mystery. Though he confesses to not knowing much on the subject, he says he wouldn't be surprised if certain affluent racists donated to the cause because they liked the idea of keeping blacks and whites separate. One thing he knows for sure is that the chief of the American Nazi party donated twenty dollars at a recent Nation of Islam rally, and he and Malcolm X came to the conclusion that, in terms of race, they completely agreed with one another. Baldwin makes clear that "the glorification of one race and the consequent debasement of another…always has been and always will be a recipe for murder." And once this process has begun, there is little reason stopping the affiliated parties from eventually attempting to exterminate the entirety of their supposed enemy—this, of course, is the path the Nazis took in Germany.

The fact that Malcolm X decided that the Nation of Islam was in agreement with the American Nazi party regarding the separation of the races is yet another sign that power—and the pursuit of it—leads to illogical and ill-advised conclusions, a point Baldwin further illustrates by pointing to the Holocaust, an example of where this sort of thinking leads.

Baldwin asserts that he is very committed to African-Americans gaining full freedom in the United States, but he also makes clear that he is concerned about the "health of their souls." Therefore, he voices his disapproval of any African-American attempt to inflict upon white people what white people inflicted upon them.

Inherent in this idea is the thought that the United States is made up of white and black people together. If the two races trade turns subjugating and oppressing the other, the country will make no progress and, therefore, neither will its people—black or white.

Shifting away from the Nation of Islam, Baldwin suggests that there can be no hope for meaningful change in the life of African-Americans if the United States doesn't substantially alter its political and social structures. Unfortunately, only small gestures toward freedom have been offered to African-Americans, such as the 1954 court decision to outlaw segregation in public schools, which Baldwin presents as an example of "tokenism," or a small and barely-influential nod toward freedom. Again, he argues that this decision was only made in order to "woo" African **nations** during the Cold War in the hopes that they wouldn't join the USSR. He writes that, just as the word "integration" means next to nothing in America, the word "independence" means very little in Africa, where European colonizers have still not left the nations they conquered long ago.

By calling attention to the United States' ulterior motives, Baldwin shows that concessions of freedom or equality in America are only ever made insofar as they can be used politically to benefit the white power structures already in place. While African nations might believe that they are free to choose whomever they'd like to side with, Baldwin believes that this thought is naïve, for the truth is that these countries are still reeling from the white colonizers, and whoever they choose to become allies with will undoubtedly oppressively use them as pawns, whether it is Russia or the United States.

Black people are extremely well poised to "precipitate chaos and bring down the curtain on the American dream," though Baldwin says they may never rise to power. This is partly due to the fact that all Americans are afraid to truly examine this American dream, as they don't actually want to know certain things about themselves. And this, in turn, is because most people don't truly want equality, but rather superiority. Ultimately, Americans are controlled by their own confusion about the American dream, unwilling to examine their personal lives and unwilling to take responsibility for their country's actions.

Again, an unwillingness to examine and assess the national situation presents itself as the main obstacle Americans face. Baldwin presents the American dream as something by which both black and white people are deeply confused and preoccupied. In effect, this is precisely why African-Americans are well-positioned to destroy the American dream—whereas white people believe they have something to lose (their superiority and innocence) by examining the falsity of the American dream, black people do not.

This confused attitude precipitated by the American dream has rendered the United States an "unmitigated disaster" on the international stage. Baldwin points out that Russia's main advantage over America is America's own fraught racial history, which scares away potential allies and drives them into Russian control. This means that, in effect, America's unwillingness to confront oppression on its own soil propagates oppression abroad, because Russia would surely dominate these **nations**. Once America acknowledges its own oppressiveness, though, it will have the opportunity to set a precedent for true revolution internationally, because its difficult racial history renders it perfectly positioned to demonstrate what equality might look like. Baldwin insists that freedom brings with it a responsibility to "apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change." As such, Baldwin argues white Americans should see their troubled history as an opportunity rather than an ugly and hidden shame.

Once more, Baldwin plants himself realistically within the framework laid out by history and by the nation's present situation without succumbing to pessimism. Instead, he proposes a new way of looking at history, an outlook that leads, against all odds, to optimism.

White people in the United States, Baldwin writes, believe that they possess something intrinsically desirable, something that black people aspire to. This assumption makes white people believe that African-Americans want to be accepted by whites, but when a white person grants this supposedly desirable acceptance, it just reinforces his or her sense of self-importance and value. In reality, nothing supports this idea of intrinsic white value, a fact that Baldwin believes white people are, at the bottom of their hearts, aware of. As such, a large part of America's racial problem has to do with "the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is." At the same time, contemporary white people yearn to be seen as they are, to be "released from the tyranny of [the] mirror."

The "tyranny of [the] mirror" is a complicated idea in this context, for Baldwin has gone to great lengths to prove that white Americans refuse to examine themselves for fear of what they will find. But in this case, the metaphor of a white person looking in the mirror symbolizes the white obsession with a constructed—which is to say outward and public—identity. If a black person grants a white person the kindness of looking at him in a meaningful way, the white person no longer needs the mirror. At the same time, he can no longer control the way he is seen, as he could in the mirror when he himself was the beholder.

Baldwin says that it is for this reason that love is so important, as it has the ability to pull everybody out of the masks they wear. White people must stop projecting their fears onto African-Americans so that they can learn to accept black people and, thus, accept themselves. Baldwin remarks that, while the black man came to the white man in search of some tangible thing—a place to sleep or perhaps some money—the white man came to the black man for love. The problem is, of course, that the white man found himself unable to love the black man, rendering himself unlovable.

Unafraid of repeating himself, Baldwin once again champions love as the ultimate means of creating equality. To him, achieving love is the country's primary obstacle.

Baldwin implores Americans—both black and white—to come together like "lovers." He encourages black people to force their white countrymen into consciousness regarding race and, in the end, themselves. If America is capable of banding together like this, it might stand a chance of finally establishing itself as a united country and changing the world. If **the country** fails to do this, however, he warns that the old prophecy, "re-created from the Bible in song by a slave," will be upon **the nation**: *"God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!"*

Again, Baldwin upholds that America's liberation could mean the liberation of the entire world, as the freedom of the black American would set an example for other nations attempting to take control of other nonwhite nations. His concluding warning draws upon the notion, based on passages in the Bible, that on the Day of Judgment, God will use fire to destroy the earth and punish sinners. And although Baldwin issues this as a warning, it reads more like a lament—Baldwin, after all, cares deeply about his fellow humans.

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