The Amen Corner Study Guide

The Amen Corner by James Baldwin

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Introduction

The Amen Corner, the first dramatic play by the now much-celebrated African-American novelist, essayist, and playwright James Baldwin, was written during the 1950s, first performed on the professional stage in 1965, and first published in 1968.

The Amen Comer takes place in two settings: a "corner" church in Harlem and the apartment dwelling of Margaret Anderson, the church pastor, and of her son, David, and sister Odessa. After giving a fiery Sunday morning sermon, Margaret is confronted by the unexpected arrival of her long estranged husband, Luke, who collapses from illness shortly thereafter. Their son, David, along with several elders of the congregation, learn from Luke that, while Margaret had led everyone to believe that he had abandoned her with their son years ago, it was in fact Margaret who had left Luke in pursuit of a purely religious life. This information precipitates confrontations between Margaret and her son, her congregation, and her estranged husband, regarding what they see as the hypocritical nature of her religious convictions, which she uses to justify the breakup of her family. After an important conversation with his dying father, David informs Margaret that he is leaving home to pursue his calling as a jazz musician. On his deathbed, Luke declares to Margaret that he has always loved her, and that she should not have left him. Finally, Margaret's congregation decides to oust her, based on their perception that she unjustly ruined her own family in the name of religion. Only after losing her son, her husband, and her congregation, does Margaret finally realize that she should not have used religion as an excuse to escape the struggles of life and love, but that "To love the Lord is to love all His children all of them, everyone! and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!"

The Amen Corner addresses themes of the role of the church in the African-American family, the complex relationship between religion and earthly love, and the effect of a poverty born of racial prejudice on the African-American community.

Author Biography

James Baldwin was born on August 2,1924, in New York City, to David Baldwin, a factory worker and clergyman, and Emma (Jones) Baldwin. Baldwin was the eldest of nine children, whom he spent much of his childhood helping to raise and care for amidst the poverty of black Harlem. During his high school years, the young Baldwin became a revivalist minister for the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly. He graduated from De Witt Clinton High School in 1942, after which he began working in the defense industry in New Jersey. In 1942, when his stepfather died, Baldwin decided to become a writer and moved to Greenwich Village, New York, to pursue his goal. There he took on various unskilled odd jobs while working on his first novel. In 1944, he met the celebrated black novelist Richard Wright, who aided Baldwin's career by helping him to get an Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship. Finding the racism in the United States more and more unbearable, Baldwin in 1948 moved to Paris, where he gained experience and insight crucial to his writing career, his sense of racial heritage, and his sexual identity.

It was during this period that his first two novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *Giovanni's Room* (1956), were published. Returning to the United States in 1957, Baldwin became an important public speaker and activist in the burgeoning civil rights movement, a political role he maintained throughout his life. He continued to be a world traveler, living for various periods in France and other countries, as well as in the Untied States. Baldwin wrote distinguished works in several forms. Important essays on racial issues are collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Notable fiction, besides his first novels, includes *Another Country* (1962) and *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974). *The Amen Corner* (1955) and *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964) are his most celebrated dramas. Baldwin died of stomach cancer on November 30 or December 1 (sources vary), 1987, in St. Paul de Vence, France.

Plot Summary

Act I

Act I takes place "on a Sunday morning in Harlem." It begins with a church service, led by Margaret Anderson, the pastor of a "corner" church. The singing of hymns, accompanied by Margaret's eighteen-year-old son, David, on the piano, is an important element of the service. At one point, Mrs. Ida Jackson, a young woman, walks up to the pulpit holding her sick baby; she asks Margaret what she should do to save her baby, and Margaret advises her to leave her husband, but Mrs. Jackson asserts that she doesn't want to leave her husband.

After the service, Margaret, her sister Odessa, David, and three elders of the church, Sister Moore, Sister Boxer, and Brother Boxer, congregate in Margaret's apartment, which is attached to the church. Margaret's long estranged husband, Luke, arrives unexpectedly at the apartment. In front of David and the church elders, Luke confronts Margaret with the fact that, while she had led everyone to believe that he had abandoned her with their son years earlier, it was in fact Margaret who had left Luke. After an infant of theirs had died, Margaret had blamed Luke for the tragedy, and had abandoned him to pursue a purely religious life. Luke then collapses from illness and is taken to lie down on a bed in Margaret's apartment. Although David and the others plead with Margaret to stay and care for the dying Luke, Margaret leaves for a brief trip to Philadelphia for the purpose of aiding another church.

Act II

Act II is set the following Saturday afternoon. In the first scene, Odessa, Sister Boxer, and Sister Moore sit in the kitchen of the apartment, discussing Sister Margaret's role in the church, given this new information that she had abandoned her own husband. The church elders express some discontent with Margaret's use of the church funds and with her treatment of the congregation, as well as the hypocrisy they perceive in her years of lying about her relationship with her husband. In the next scene, David enters the room where his father, Luke, lies ill. David and Luke discuss David's ambitions to become a jazz musician and his father's life as a jazz musician. Luke explains to David that being abandoned by Margaret had ruined his life. Luke encourages David to pursue jazz, but also explains to him that music is nothing if a man doesn't have the love of a woman in his life.

During the next scene, in the church, several of the church elders and other congregation members gather to discuss Margaret's position as pastor of the church. They criticize Margaret for her use of church funds, her treatment of her husband, and her seeming hypocrisies in regard to what she preaches versus how she lives her own life. They all break into a hymn, during which Margaret enters the church, just back from

Philadelphia. She explains that the Philadelphia congregation will be coming to join their service the next day. They all sing a hymn and then say a prayer.

In the following scene, David brings a record player into the room where Luke lies and plays a record of Luke playing the trombone. Margaret enters the bedroom, and David leaves with the record player. Margaret and Luke then have a conversation about their relationship and the role of religion in Margaret's life, but the two come to no understanding. Odessa then enters and warns Margaret that the church is about to have a business meeting in which they will be discussing Margaret's position as pastor.

Act III

Act III takes place the following Sunday morning. In the first scene, Margaret and Mrs. Jackson talk in the church; Mrs. Jackson's baby has died, but she resists Margaret's religious advice about the matter and insists that she is more concerned with her husband than with religion. In the kitchen of the apartment, Margaret and her sister Odessa discuss Margaret's relationship with Luke. Later in the church, Odessa joins the church elders, who are again discussing their plans to oust Margaret from her post as pastor. Odessa attempts to defend Margaret against this decision. In the apartment, David confronts Margaret with the fact that he has decided to leave home to pursue his calling as a jazz musician.

Margaret enters the bedroom where Luke lies dying, and they discuss David's decision to leave. Margaret and Luke finally make peace with one another and admit that they still love each other; as they embrace, Luke dies. Margaret then enters the church and speaks to the congregation, although she knows that they have chosen to oust her from her position. Margaret tells the congregation that she is "just now finding out what it means to love the Lord." She concludes that "To love the Lord is to love all His children all of them, everyone! and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!" The congregation breaks into a hymn as Margaret steps down from the pulpit, enters the room where Luke lies dead, and falls beside his body on the bed.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The play opens on a stage set up as a church with an attached apartment. As the curtain rises, members of the congregation begin singing a lively gospel tune. When the song ends, Margaret Alexander, the pastor of the church, begins speaking amid shouts of Amen and Hallelujah. She opens her sermon by mentioning King Hezekiah, who, upon hearing the decree "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live," sent for the prophet Isaiah to give him guidance in spiritual matters. Margaret points out to the congregation that, despite the king's access to his whole kingdom, he chose Isaiah, a holy man of God. The king, Margaret preaches, probably never spent any time with Isaiah; he did not invite him to parties because devout people make others uncomfortable. However, when trouble comes, the king went to a man of God. Margaret applies this story to the congregation, saying that perhaps church members have experienced something similar; maybe somebody with a problem who needs to talk has approached them. Margaret declares that the world is watching them, but they cannot expect to help if they are not living holy lives. She gives a couple examples of unholy things, such as reading the funny papers or working for a liquor delivery company. She calls for reform among the members by stating the biblical premise that no man can serve two masters.

The congregation sings another song, this one focusing on the Holy Spirit and walking with guidance from above. After the song, Sister Moore, one of the church elders, takes the stage. She tells how Margaret will go to their sister church in Philadelphia to help members that are sick in the body and soul. She says a prayer thanking God for her life and purity from all men. The congregation sings a song about coming to Jesus so he can save you, then Sister Moore asks members of the church to come forward if they feel troubled or sinful or in need of special prayer.

One young woman, Mrs. Ida Jackson comes forward with a sick baby. Her husband is at home, bitter about religion. She weeps as she asks for their blessing for her sick son. She has already lost one child and is afraid she will lose Daniel as well. Margaret assures her that prayer will help and tells her not to worry. Margaret suggests that perhaps God does not approve of Mrs. Jackson's marriage, but Mrs. Jackson seems troubled with the suggestion. Margaret proceeds to pray for and bless the child and tells Mrs. Jackson to return to the church with her child and husband.

Sister Moore takes the offering from the church, encouraging members to give money to help with the cost of Margaret's trip to Philadelphia. The congregation sings "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah" as Margaret exits into the apartment, where her sister, Odessa, awaits her with a cup of coffee. Odessa compliments Margaret for the service, but Margaret gives credit to the Holy Spirit. She tells Odessa of her plans to take her son, David, with her to Philadelphia. When Odessa worries that he will not want to go, Margaret quotes scripture and assures her that David will not disobey. Just before David enters,

Margaret praises God for helping her raise David without his father, Luke, who is said to have run off when David was a young boy.

When David hears of the plans for Philadelphia, he uses several excuses to convince his mother he should stay home, including that he must play piano for the evening service and does not want to miss a week of music school. Despite his obvious objection to going to Philadelphia, Margaret insists he come. The entrance of Brother and Sister Boxer and Sister Moore interrupts their argument. The three church elders praise Margaret for her sermon. Margaret and the elders discuss David and the church in Philadelphia, whose church leader, Mother Phillips, is ill and whose congregation has gone astray.

Brother Boxer brings up David's absent father, and Sister Moore says that David would be much different if he had been around his father. David agrees then tells his mom that he has to take care of something before they leave for a week. He leaves, and Margaret and Odessa exit the kitchen area.

In the kitchen, Brother Boxer tells the others that Luke is back in New York playing for a jazz club. As far as they know, Margaret has not heard the news, but they imagine that David has. This leads into conversation about Brother Boxer working for a liquor company and they debate the morality of it. Sisters Moore and Boxer believe that Brother Boxer is not doing any wrong; he is providing for his family and making an honest living. As Margaret and Odessa re-enter, followed shortly by David, the three others sing a hymn and return to the discussion of Brother Boxer's job. Sister Moore confronts Margaret, but Margaret stands her ground, claiming that the Lord comes before everything else. They sing another hymn.

Luke enters the home and everyone greets him with shock. He says a round of hellos and tells David that he saw him at the jazz club the night before. Margaret feels betrayed, saying that God does not like lying. They all make small talk for a while, but the conversation turns more serious as Margaret asks why Luke has come. Confusion ensues when David accuses Luke of running away from his family. After some banter, Luke forces Margaret to tell the truth; she was the one who left. She argues that he was always off at the jazz clubs and drinking whiskey. She claims she did it to save David and follow the Lord.

Shocked, David reminds his mom that God does not like liars. As Luke starts to leave, he tells David to come to the club if he wants to get to know him. Odessa realizes that Luke is sick as he sways and falls into the table. They take him into the bedroom and lay him on the bed.

Everyone tries to convince Margaret to stay, but she sticks to her plan, even though Luke is calling for her and the others are telling her she can help him. She says that Luke needs to call on the Lord. After telling David to call a doctor and Odessa to send a telegram if anything happens, Margaret leaves. The others stay in the house and begin to sing a prayer.

Act 1 Analysis

The Amen Corner is James Baldwin's second full-length work and first play. Setting and time play an important role in the meaning of this three-act play, as does Baldwin's own struggles with faith and family. Set in Harlem in 1955, *The Amen Corner* portrays a struggling African American family and church. Though racial relations are not the main theme of the play, issues surrounding African Americans during this time have apparent undercurrents throughout the dialogue and action of the play. In life, James Baldwin never knew his father, but grew up in the house of his stepfather: a stern and demanding pastor who expected James to follow his example. In his notes for this play, Baldwin admits to the parallels between the play and his life. Like the character of Sister Margaret, he knew first hand the obstacles facing African Americans and the potential sanctity offered by the church.

This first act establishes the central dilemma upon which the play is based: Sister Margaret's history with Luke and how that affects her passionate but deceptive role as pastor in a Harlem church. The character of David, who can be viewed as a somewhat autobiographical character, obviously struggles with his loyalty to his mother and the church and his own pining to pursue a career in music. Like David, Baldwin once faced the choice of staying with his family and working in the church, or pursuing his dream to become a writer.

It is important to note how the characters are portrayed in this act, as many of them undergo important and dramatic changes throughout the play. First, let us look at Sister Margaret. She is a strong woman in a leadership role who stubbornly adheres to the word of God and expects all those around her to do so as well. Though respected by church members at the beginning of the play, her position becomes tenuous when her estranged husband returns and her son begins to stray from the holy path. Throughout the play, a woman's role and her ability to lead without a man are questioned, as are Margaret's motives for pursuing the church in the first place.

Then there is David. In the beginning, we see him torn between obeying his mother and the church and pursuing his dream to follow in his father's footsteps to become a musician. As the play progresses, it quickly becomes apparent which way he is headed.

At the beginning of the play, the church elders and members support Margaret whole-heartedly, often praising her leadership and steadfastness in the Word. Once they learn the truth about Luke, however, they quickly become suspicious of her.

Perhaps only two characters remain steady throughout the play: Odessa and Luke. Odessa consistently defends her sister and shows no sign of straying from the church. On the other hand, Luke comes to Margaret a sick and beaten man, but a man who knows his mistakes and is prepared to live with them; even as he wishes things could have been different.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Act 2 takes place the following Saturday afternoon. The play opens on Odessa, Sister Moore and Sister Boxer talking about Margaret. Sister Moore and Sister Boxer think that Margaret has been deceitful and misled them by acting pure and holy while carrying on with the big lie about Luke. Odessa tries to defend her sister, averring that Luke would have led Margaret to an evil lifestyle. Sister Boxer counters that Margaret could have led Luke to the Lord.

Brother Boxer enters and joins the conversation and becomes the most vocal to argue against Margaret, reminding the rest that she had advised Mrs. Jackson to leave her husband in last week's service. He also calls David a hypocrite, saying he had seen David getting into a car with two boys and three girls, smoking a cigarette and cuddling up to one of the girls.

Odessa yells at them for telling lies and tells them they need to pray. Agreeing, Sister Moore mentions that some of the church members have been wondering where all the offering money has been going. Odessa thinks they are accusing Margaret of stealing, but Sister Moore assures her that they do no such thing. They exit into the church to pray.

David enters the house, appearing agitated, and checks on Luke. As he begins to walk away, Luke speaks to him. David opens the shade at his request and they each have a cigarette. They talk about music, complimenting each other for their musical abilities.

After the small talk, David asks why his father had never looked for him. Luke claims he wanted to but never followed through. As David talks, he begins to get emotional, telling Luke that he has dreamed of his return and has always felt ashamed that his father left. Luke tells him not to run away from the pain but to use it. David asks Luke if he has been saved, and Luke says no. David begins to tell his father about two men who kept returning to church to hear him play piano and eventually asked him to join their combo. Since he started playing with them, David stopped praying and began to hate going to church. He feels torn because he loves the music and is starting to see the world in a while new way, but he still has a part of him that does not want to lie to his mother and fall to a life of sin. He weeps as he tells his father how alone he feels.

Realizing his son worries about turning out like him, Luke assures David that music did not ruin him. He goes into a long, poetic explanation of his failure, telling David that he did not have anybody to love him and therefore he did not have "himself." He lost himself and just felt hollow. The music gave him moments, but life is too long to live on moments. Yes, he had his time, but he never turned to God. David asks if he is scared and Luke replies, "Oh yes."

David leaves and lights come up in the church where Sister Moore, Brother and Sister Boxer, and several members of the congregation are sitting in a circle, discussing the offering money. Though the offering gathered $40.87, most of them agree that it only costs a few dollars to travel to Philadelphia. They are talking about it for a while before Sister Rice interrupts and tells them they should not be worrying about the money; they should trust Margaret as their pastor. Adding to that sentiment, Odessa reminds them how much it costs to upkeep the church and have everything in good repair. Brother Boxer mentions the brand new Frigidaire in the kitchen, but Odessa tells him she bought it with money she made cleaning white people's houses.

The conversation turns back to Margaret and all of her burdens. Sister Boxer says how Margaret does not even have time to pray for her own sick husband. They talk of how Luke is dying from his sin and sleeps so much he has not been able to spend much time with David. For the second time, Brother Boxer tells about David straying from the holy life. He also brings up the cost of a painted window in the church. A Philadelphia painter charged $53, and Brother Boxer says it could have been done for much cheaper locally. The members talk about this for a while, ultimately discussing why they do not have a better church to worship in. Odessa says her sister is doing the best for the church, but others believe they should have a better building. When Odessa says they need to stop "back-biting" Margaret, Sister Moore claims they are simply discussing issues of the church. She also questions the reasons for David's straying and Luke's illness, but concludes that the Lord will reveal his purpose eventually. After singing another song, Margaret enters.

Though the congregation appears happy to see her, they get suspicious when Margaret tells her that one of the church members drove her back. Margaret goes on to tell them that the Philadelphia congregation plans to drive up for Sunday's service. They will bring a set of drums and a trombone player. When Sister Rice question the worldliness (or ungodliness) of worshiping with drums and a trombone, Margaret tells them it is not the thing that is evil but what is done with it. Brother Boxer predicts that the music service will bring David back to the church, but Margaret argues that he loves the Lord more than music.

Once again, Sister Boxer brings up the issue of her husband driving the liquor truck, arguing that he will be bringing more money into their poor church. She uses Margaret's claim that the "thing" is not evil to justify Brother Boxer's actions. Margaret refuses to see a similarity, because she believes the music will bring more people to the church.

As they are talking, David is bringing a phonograph into his father's room to play Luke his own record. When Margaret hears the music, she commands all the members to get down on their knees and pray. As they do, she goes into the house to yell at David. Luke defends his son and encourages him to be strong and go his own way. David leaves, ignoring his mother's objections. Margaret turns her anger on Luke. As they argue, Luke tries to remind Margaret or "Maggie" of the good times they shared and the love they had in their relationship. Maggie refuses to remember, claiming she always wanted to follow Jesus. In fact, she continuously tries to encourage Luke to give his soul over to the Lord. Luke refuses and urges Maggie to remember the spunky young

woman she used to be and to allow David to create his own life. Maggie argues that David is set to become a preacher and work with her in the church. Their argument reveals the reason behind Maggie's change of heart; she believes she lost her baby daughter because they had been living selfish lies. Though Luke points out the faulty logic of this idea, Maggie will not hear it. She continues to try to get Luke to come to Jesus, but he refuses to "come crawling to the Lord" because he believes his life was more than just music and chasing women. He also mentions that he does not want to prove Maggie right in the eyes of their son. Maggie tells him he is going to die and he should save his soul while he has a chance.

She leaves the room to find Odessa in the kitchen. The group of church members is having a business meeting upstairs. Odessa goes off to find David while Maggie stands in the kitchen, crying, asking the Lord to give her strength.

Act 2 Analysis

In this act, we see characters and their situations begin to spiral out of control. Despite her best efforts, Margaret begins to lose control of her son, her congregation and her own solidity. The church elders who were so praising of Margaret in the first act begin to take every chance to speak against her and we begin to see their motive to oust her from her position of power.

Meanwhile, David has his first and only serious talk with his father, but it marks one of the most important moments in the play. Luke tells his son that regardless of whatever circumstances a man might encounter, he only needs one thing. "That one thing is *him*, David, who he is inside- and son, I don't believe no man ever got to that without somebody loved him." This statement becomes a motivating theme behind the play and the subsequent changes in the characters of Margaret and David.

Another major theme of the play centers on hypocrisy within the church. Many of the characters exhibit some form of hypocrisy. Most obvious is Margaret, who, as the church elders are quick to point out, preaches with holiness and purity that betrays events in her past. She berates David for lying to her but turns out to be a liar herself. She blames Luke for playing jazz and drinking, but she is the one who walked out on the marriage.

The church elders, likewise, illustrate a more subtle form of hypocrisy. They fault Margaret for taking up with a jazz player in the first place, but also call it a sin to walk out on a marriage. They claim to be doing the Lord's work, but as the play progresses, they take greater and greater steps to overthrow Margaret, often acting kind to her face while speaking out against her behind her back.

In his notes for the play, Baldwin sums up Margaret's dilemma, which is "how to treat her husband and her son as men and at the same time to protect them from the bloody consequences of trying to be a man in this society." This becomes apparent in her conversation with Luke at the end of Act 2. She is so concerned about bringing them to

God that she fails to see them as the talented men that they are. She knows she has lost the battle with Luke, but she makes a last effort to save his soul before his death. Likewise, she hopes to keep control of David and keep him safe in the church so that he can avoid the dangers of society altogether. Luke, on the other hand, tries to convince her that David is better off living a life "as long as it's his life- not mine, not his mama's, but his own." Luke values this above being safe and saved in the church.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

As the scene opens, Mrs. Jackson from the first act enters the church, weeping. Margaret also enters and Mrs. Jackson asks her why God took her baby away. Though Margaret encourages her to trust God, Mrs. Jackson is inconsolable, unable to understand why her baby would have to suffer even though she and her husband have been praying for their child. After unsuccessfully trying to convince Mrs. Jackson to pray and consider doing the Lord's work, Margaret tells her not to give up on having another baby and to go home to her husband.

In the kitchen, Margaret and Odessa discuss the day ahead. David has not returned all night and the congregation has been rising up against Margaret, with Sister Moore making an effort to become the pastor of the church. Odessa encourages Margaret to rest, but Margaret begins talking about Luke, admitting to having feelings for him and to being unable to say Amen at the end of any of her prayers.

Brother and Sister Boxer and Sister Moore arrive at the church hoping to talk to Margaret before the service begins. At the previous night's business meeting, the members had decided to reveal to the congregation what they believe to be the error in Margaret's ways. Instead, however, they had risen early to go door to door to tell the members that they did not see Margaret as fit to lead their church any longer.

In defense of her sister, Odessa asks what Margaret has done to inspire so much hate. Their reasoning points mainly back to Luke and all of them discuss the ability of a woman who has left her husband to lead a church. Odessa continues to argue for her sister, obviously hurt by the way the others are acting. She says that although she has never been married, she understands the way men and women get attracted to each other.

During their discussion, David enters the house after a long night of drinking. Margaret asks where he has been, but then smells whiskey on his breath and is upset, hurt that he acted this way considering how she raised him. Though he shows some remorse, David tells his mother that he will no longer be playing piano for the church; in fact, he plans to leave to tour with a group of musicians. He has lost the Holy Spirit, and though Margaret tells him to pray to get it back, he holds his ground, saying he must leave to follow the life he wants so that he does not end up wasting away and hating her. He wants to be a man and thinks he can make a difference with his music.

After David leaves, Odessa encourages Margaret to get herself together so she can win back the favor of the church. Weeping, Margaret seems beaten and admits that she used the church to hide from the loss of her baby and her fear of losing Luke to music. She forgets ever having the vision with which Odessa credits her, and she recalls a time when they used to know a sad and lonely, though church-going, woman in their

neighborhood. She even goes as far as to say that the Lord is "the most impossible kind of man there is."

Before she goes to the service, she talks with Brother Boxer, who rudely tells her she has lost her fervor for God since Luke returned. To him, she is just a woman who feigned holiness and controlled people after running away from her man.

The service begins in the church as Margaret goes in to talk to Luke. They talk about their wedding day and the love they had for one another. After Luke admits to still loving her, they embrace as Maggie also admits to loving him and wishing they could start again. Luke dies in her arms.

Margaret goes into the church and begins to preach about leading a holy life and putting Him above anything. She stops after accidentally calling the pianist David. With a dramatic change of tone, she tells the congregation that to love the Lord means more than singing and reading the Bible. She says, "To love the Lord is to love all His children…and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!" She exits the church, leaving the congregation singing a song of jubilation. The play ends as Margaret goes into Luke's room and falls beside the bed.

Act 3 Analysis

Like any good play, this one has a definite beginning, middle and end, with a climax that has moments of tension leading up to it. In Acts 1 and 2, Luke arrives and stirs up the lives of everybody in the church. The tension builds between Margaret and David as well as Margaret and the members of the church. At the end of Act 2, it becomes obvious that something has to change. In Act 3, the play reaches its climax during the Sunday service as members of the church plot to overthrow Margaret, David leaves, and Margaret and Luke reunite.

Several events in the beginning of Act 3 foreshadow the change in Margaret at the end of the play. First, she encounters Mrs. Jackson, a woman in a similar situation to the one she found herself in after losing her baby girl. Though she tries at first to get her to come to God, she reconsiders and tells the young woman to focus on her family. Secondly, in a conversation with Odessa, she tells of her inability to say Amen (which means, "so be it" or "the Lord's will be done") after her prayers. This signals that Margaret doubts the will of God and her own desire to follow it, or at least what she has considered God's will to this point. She also admits to her sister that it was not vision, but fear and grief that drove her to the church. Thirdly, her talk with Brother Boxer, in which she defends herself as a woman and not as a pastor shows us that she is rethinking her position in life. Finally, her brief but heartfelt reunion with Luke portrays her true emotions and desires; she has always loved him.

In Act 3, the themes established in the first two acts are carried out to show a complete change in the main characters of the play. David, acting on the advice and wisdom gained from his father, takes a stand against his mother and leaves to pursue a life of

music, a symbolic attempt to find his true self. Likewise, Margaret's final lesson to the church reveals her complete change of heart. At the end of the play, as she falls next to her dead husband, she has lost everything. However, true to the theme of the play, she has found herself and given full credit to the power of love. No longer content to lead hypocritical lives, Margaret and David give into their desires to pursue paths to their true selves, even though those paths are unstable and unknown.

James Baldwin's life speaks of these themes. He left his family and went to Paris to finish his first book. Even this play speaks of his need to be true to himself. In his notes, he calls writing this play a "rather irresponsible act." His agent had discouraged him from trying to break into theater, and in many ways he felt that he was expected, as a Negro writer, to produce "diminishing versions" of his first novel. He refused to fall to these standards however, and his play eventually became a big hit. His career never suffered from his decision; on the contrary, he remains one of the best-known African American writers to this day. This play, therefore, represents something even greater than intended; the play itself becomes a symbol of the theme to stay true to one's self, to pursue the dream no matter what the cost, and to live a life that is one's own.

Characters

David Alexander

David is the eighteen-year-old son of Margaret and Luke. David plays the piano in the church during Margaret's sermons, and his mother wants him to pursue a life of devotion to religion, utilizing his musical talents for that purpose only. David, however, has enrolled in a music school, and has been secretly sneaking out to jazz clubs and playing in a *jazz* band. One night, he sneaks out to hear his estranged father, Luke, also a musician, play at a jazz club. When Luke arrives at Margaret's house, David learns that it was his mother who had left his father, and not his father who had abandoned them, as she had led him to believe. While Margaret had wanted David to accompany her to Philadelphia, David chooses to stay home with his dying father. David and Luke have an important discussion about the family history, his parents' relationship, and jazz music. When Margaret returns from Philadelphia, David confronts her with the decision that he is leaving home to pursue a career as a jazz musician. David tries to explain to his mother that he can make a better contribution to the world through pursuing his own musical calling, pleading with her that "Maybe I can say something one day maybe I can say something in music that's never been said before."

Luke Alexander

Luke is the estranged husband of Margaret, and the father of David. Luke arrives unexpectedly at Margaret's house and collapses from illness. He confronts Margaret with the fact that she had left him after blaming him for the death of their infant child years earlier. Margaret is unsympathetic to his pleas of love for her, and leaves for a brief trip to Philadelphia, despite the fact that he lies dying in a bed in her home. While Margaret is gone, Luke has an important conversation with their son, David, in which he tries to explain to David his perspective on his relationship with Margaret. After Margaret returns from Philadelphia, Luke again confronts her with the fact that she had unfairly blamed him for the death of their infant and had used religion as an escape and an excuse to leave him. He tells her that David's decision to leave is a decision to "live," not a moral lapse on his part. Most of all, Luke pleads with Margaret that he loved her and needed her and that she should never have left him. Luke then dies, after which Margaret finally realizes the truth of what he has said.

Margaret Alexander

Margaret Alexander is the pastor of a church. In the first scene of the play, she gives a sermon. She then prepares to leave for a brief trip to Philadelphia to aid another church. As she is about to leave, her estranged husband, Luke, arrives unexpectedly and collapses from illness. Several members of Margaret's congregation learn that while she had lead everyone to believe that Luke had abandoned her with their son, David, in fact

it was Margaret who left Luke. Despite the fact that Luke lies on his deathbed in her home, Margaret leaves for Philadelphia anyway. While she is gone, members of her congregation meet to discuss their various dissatisfactions with Margaret's position as pastor of their church. They question her use of church funds as well as the new information that she had abandoned her own husband. When Margaret returns, she is confronted by her son, her estranged husband, and her congregation. David informs her that he has been secretly playing in a jazz band and is going to leave home to pursue a career as a jazz musician. Luke confronts her with the fact that she had blamed him for the death of their infant child years ago and had abandoned him in the name of the service of God; Luke points out Margaret's hypocrisy in using religion as an excuse to escape life. Finally, Margaret' s congregation confronts her on similar grounds. Having lost her son, her husband, and her congregation, Margaret finally realizes that religion should not have been an excuse for her to break up her family but a reason for her to stand by her man.

Brother Boxer

Brother Boxer is an elder of Margaret's church who resents her for insisting that it is sinful of him to take a job driving a liquor delivery truck.

Sister Boxer

Sister Boxer is an elder of Margaret's church who criticizes Margaret for insisting that it is sinful for her husband, Brother Boxer, to take a job driving a liquor delivery truck.

Ida Jackson

Ida Jackson is a young woman who steps up to the pulpit during Margaret's sermon with a plea for help for her sick baby. Margaret advises her to leave her husband, but Mrs. Jackson protests that she doesn't want to leave her husband. Later, Mrs. Jackson returns to Margaret for consolation after her baby has died. Again, Mrs. Jackson protests Margaret's religious explanations and consolations, asserting instead that "I just want my man and my home and my children." Margaret tells her that she needs to pray, but Mrs. Jackson disagrees, maintaining that she is going home to her husband instead. Margaret finally realizes that Mrs. Jackson is right to stand by her man, rather than abandon him in the name of religion, telling her, "Get on home to your husband. Go on home, to your man."

Sister Moore

Sister Moore is an elder of Margaret's church who is instrumental in having Margaret ousted from her position as pastor.

Odessa

Odessa is Margaret's sister, who lives with Margaret and David. Odessa is supportive of Margaret, and defends her against the criticism of the members of her congregation.

Themes

Religion

Religion is a central theme in Baldwin's play. The first seventeen pages of the play are taken up with a Sunday morning church sermon, led by the pastor, Sister Margaret Anderson. Baldwin has noted that this material was in part based on his own experiences as a young minister. Baldwin also wished the theater audience to be swept up in the experience of actually attending a church service. The role of religion in Margaret's life is examined and questioned by various characters throughout the play. While Margaret presents herself as a pure, holy woman who has been abandoned by her husband, others point out that she has used religion as an excuse to escape from the problems of the material world. It is Luke who finally impresses upon Margaret the idea that she has misinterpreted the significance of religion. Luke points out that human love is not at odds with religion, but is in fact an important element of religion. It is only after she has lost her son, her husband, and her congregation that Margaret is able to appreciate Luke's words. Her final words to her congregation confirm her understanding.

Poverty

Although not one of the play's most prominent themes, the impact of poverty permeates the play as an underlying condition of the lives of the characters. Margaret berates Brother Boxer for taking a job driving a liquor delivery truck, asserting that it is sinful of him to spend his day providing liquor to people. Sister Boxer, Brother Boxer's wife, however, complains that Margaret is not taking into account the importance of earning a living and supporting a family. In other words, it is economic necessity, based on the limited availability of jobs to African-American men during that time period, which requires that Brother Boxer accept the best job he can find. Poverty is also an underlying theme in the death of Margaret's infant, years before the play takes place, and the death of Mrs. Ida Jackson's infant. It is made clear that these babies became sick and died due to poor nutrition (and perhaps inadequate medical care) because of their poverty. Reference is also made to the limited availability of jobs for African-American women, as one character refers to her work as a maid in the home of a white woman. Thus, while there are no white characters who appear in the play, the black community is presented within a broader context of racial inequality in which African-American women have little choice but to work in positions of servitude to white women, and African-American men are compelled to accept whatever jobs may be available to them.

Love

Many critics have noted that one of the recurring themes throughout Baldwin's fiction is that of love. Baldwin states in his "Notes" to the published play that the first line he wrote was Margaret's in Act III: "It's an awful thing to think about, the way love never dies!" Margaret throughout most of the play has made the mistake of substituting religion for the love of her own husband. Luke insists that he still loves her, and yet she continues to deny her own feelings of love for him. Through the character of Luke, the love of a woman is presented as a necessity to the survival of black men in a racist society; Luke's downfall is attributed to Margaret's withholding of love from him. It is only at the end, just before Luke dies, that Margaret is able to understand the power of love: "Maybe it's not possible to stop loving anybody you ever really loved. I never stopped loving you, Luke. I tried. But I never stopped loving you." Baldwin explains that although Margaret, by the end, "has lost everything," she "also gains the keys to the kingdom." He goes on to say that "The kingdom is love, and love is selfless, although only the self can lead one there. She gains herself."

Style

Staging

Baldwin wrote this play with a very specific stage set in mind. The two main parts of the set are the church and the adjoining apartment. The positioning of the church in relation to the apartment is symbolic of the role of the church in the life of the family. The stage notes indicate that "The church is on a level above the apartment and should give the impression of dominating the family's living quarters." This is meant to symbolize the dominating influence of the church on Margaret's family. The set design within the church is also a key element of Baldwin's vision for this play. The stage notes indicate that the church "is dominated by the pulpit, on a platform, upstage." Thus, within the church itself, Margaret, as the pastor giving sermons, is the dominant figure. This set design emphasizes the extent to which the church is an arena in which Margaret holds a great deal of power, as opposed to the rest of the world, in which she is an impoverished single black woman. The program notes also mention that on the platform on which the pulpit sits is "a thronelike chair." The implication is that, in the world of her congregation, Margaret reigns supreme, as if she were royalty. This again emphasizes, by way of contrast, the extent to which, in the rest of the world, Margaret as a poor African-American woman is virtually powerless. Finally, Baldwin wanted the stage set of the church to position the audience of the play itself as if they, too, were members of the congregation, listening to Margaret's sermons. This positioning of the audience is key to one of Baldwin's central goals in writing this play: to suggest a parallel between theatrical elements of performance and audience participation in the black church with that of the theater.

Sermons

A central element of Baldwin's play is the church sermons led by Pastor Margaret. As he has stated in his "Notes" which preface the published edition of the play: "I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of the theatre, the communion which is the theatre. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theatre was to recreate moments I remembered, as a boy preacher, to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up, and, hopefully, to change them." The long service that begins the play alternates the singing of hymns with a fiery sermon by Sister Margaret. Margaret's sermon is written in the highly developed and stylized oratory style of African-American ministers. This oratory style is most easily recognized by the use of repetition of key phrases and the use of black English vernacular. The civil rights activist Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. has been widely noted for his skill and mastery of this oratory style, particularly as exemplified by his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Historical Context

African-American Literary Movements

Twentieth-century African-American literature has been characterized by two important literary movements: the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. The Harlem Renaissance, also referred to as the New Negro Movement, designates a period during the 1920s in which African-American literature flourished among a group of writers concentrated in the Harlem section of New York City. Important writers of the Harlem Renaissance include James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912); Claude McKay, who wrote the best-selling novel *Home to Harlem* (1928); Langs ton Hughes, who wrote the poetry collection *The Weary Blues* (1926); and Wallace Thurman, who wrote the novel *The Blacker the Berry* (1929). This period of incredible literary output diminished when the Great Depression of the 1930s affected the financial status of many African-American writers. The Black Arts Movement, also referred to as the Black Aesthetic Movement flourished during the 1960s and 70s, and embodied values derived from black nationalism and promoted politically and socially significant works, often written in Black English vernacular. Important writers of the Black Arts Movement include Imamu Amiri Baraka (also known as LeRoi Jones), Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison.

Black Theater

Dramatic works by African-American writers in the nineteenth century include *King Shotaway* (1823), by William Henry Brown, the first known play by an African-American writer; *The Escape: or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858), by William Wells Brown, the first play by an African-American writer to be published; and *Rachel* (1916), by Anglina W. Grimke, the first successful stage play by an African-American writer. Important literary movements, such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, influenced dramatic works and stage productions by African Americans in the twentieth century. The development of Black Theater in the first half of the twentieth century was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, and included the establishment of theaters devoted to black productions in major cities throughout the United States. The most prominent black theaters by mid-century were the American Negro Theater and the Negro Playwrights' Company. In the post-World War II era, black theater became more overtly political and more specifically focused on celebrating African-American culture. One of the most prominent works to emerge from this period was the 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry. The Black Arts Movement, which emerged in the 1960s, led to the establishment in 1965 of the Repertory Theater of Harlem, initiated by Amiri Baraka (still LeRoi Jones at that time). Baraka's award-winning 1964 play, *The Dutchman*, is among the most celebrated dramatic works of this period. Ntozake Shange's 1977, *for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf*, utilized an experimental dramatic format to address issues facing African-American women. In the 1980s, August Wilson emerged as an important African-

American playwright with his *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985), about a blues singer and her band, set in Chicago in the 1920s.

Critical Overview

In his "Notes" for the first publication of *The Amen Comer* in 1968, Baldwin recalls that writing the play was "a desperate and even rather irresponsible act." With one published novel to his name (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*), Baldwin was not in a strong position to succeed with his first play. As his agent at the time informed him, "the American theatre was not exactly clamoring for plays on obscure aspects of Negro life, especially one written by a virtually unknown author whose principal effort until that time had been one novel." Nevertheless, Baldwin forged ahead, and *The Amen Corner*, written in the 1950s, was first produced on the campus of Howard University, then in Los Angeles, before opening on Broadway in 1965. While it won the 1964 Foreign Drama Critics Circle Award, the play was not published in book form until 1968.

Critics have commented on the artistic success of Baldwin's play as a dramatic stage production. Carlton W. Molette, writing in 1977, stated that *The Amen Corner* "is one of the most successful Afro-American plays that I have seen." Molette asserts that "The first professional production was moving as theater ought to be but seldom is." Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, asserting that "*The Amen Corner* is a better play than its production history or critical attention would seem to indicate," especially praises the play for its qualities as a stage production, particularly in Baldwin's use of music: "the play is certainly constructed in such a way as to truly 'come alive' on the stage. Much of that liveliness and power to involve is transmitted through the music. Group singing, individual singing, instrumental accompaniment, jazz (Luke on record), all provide choral commentary on character and conflict."

Several critics have noted the play's embodiment of aesthetic values put forth by the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Darwin T. Turner explains that "*The Amen Comer* seems more clearly designed as a drama written about black experience for a black audience. In this respect, it resembles Black Arts drama, in which the dramatist presumes that he must write without concern for the white spectator, who exists outside the black experience and without comprehension of it. I do not wish to imply that Baldwin consciously designed the play for the education of a black audience. Instead, I am suggesting that he found strength in writing meaningfully about an experience he knew while assuming that his audience would be equally familiar with that experience." Turner concludes that Baldwin's "success, I feel, did not result solely from his recreation of a church setting that was familiar to him but from his presumption that his audience required no interpretation, no modification, because it already knew the cultural setting. Thus Baldwin achieved an artistic freedom rarely granted a black dramatist except when he works within the theater of a black community." Molette provides a similar assessment of Baldwin's play in terms of the ways in which it addresses its audience: "*The Amen Come*r does not protest to whites; it informs, educates, illuminates blacks.... It is not self-consciously black. The play assumes that there are some elementary aspects of black culture that do not require explanation within the body of the play. It assumes, in effect, a black audience. It is not an anti-white play, it is an a-white play."

Molette, however, does note that "the play is not perfect," pointing out that "Ironically, *The Amen Corne*r is at its worst as a play precisely when it is at its best as literature. There are several two-character scenes between the members of the Alexander family that are true literary gems. They are also the scenes of greatest character revelation. They actually tell us too much about the characters. Now, all that is told needs to be told; but some of it ought to be told through means other than words." Molette goes on to criticize scenes that are particularly static and lacking in drama when seen on stage. For example, in Act II, "the action slows down, and the words become far more important than the deed. In the theater, that usually means trouble. This is especially a problem with the scenes that involve the father (Luke), because he is confined to his sickbed, making visual interest through movement very difficult to achieve, as well."

Fred L. Standley praises the play, along with other works by Baldwin, for his treatment of "a variety of thematic concerns: the historical significance and the potential explosiveness in black-white relations; the necessity for developing a sexual and psychological consciousness and identity; the intertwining of love and power in the universal scheme of existence as well as in the structures of society; the misplaced priorities in the value systems in America; and the responsibility of the artist to promote the evolution of the individual and the society."

Trudier Harris criticized Baldwin's portrayal of female characters in a number of his works, asserting that "Few women in Baldwin's works are able to move beyond the bounds of the traditional roles that have been cut out for them and in which the use of their bodies is the most important factor." Harris offers both criticism and praise, however, of Baldwin's representation of women through the character of Margaret in *The Amen Corner*. She states that Sister Margaret "is most like the women in the fiction in her desire and ability to serve.... In her adherence to scripture, she is one of the most fanatical of Baldwin's black women characters. Yet in her recognition of the unrelenting antagonism between males and females, she voices the plight of all of the church-based women." Harris concludes, however, that, in Baldwin's fiction and drama, "for all this growth and progression, for all this freedom of action and movement, the women are still confined to niches carved out for them by men whose egos are too fragile to grant their equality."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the motif of jazz music in Baldwin's play.

Music plays a central role in expressing key themes within Baldwin's play. The play is structured thematically around two types of music: church music and jazz music. On one level, church music and jazz music are symbolic within the play of opposing sets of values, represented on each side by Luke and Margaret: church music represents Margaret's religious fervor and convictions, while jazz music represents Luke's insistence on embracing life through human love. David, the eighteen-year-old son of Margaret and Luke, is caught between the opposing sets of values held by his mother and father. He is torn between his mother's insistence that he continue as a church musician and his own desire to follow in his father's footsteps by pursuing a career as a jazz musician. By the end of the play, however, as Luke dies in her arms, Margaret realizes that life (as symbolized by jazz) and religion (as symbolized by hymns) do not embody opposing values of sin and purity but actually encompass one another as expressions of love love of life and other human beings, as well as love of the Lord.

The role of actual music in the performance of the play thus expresses the struggle between these opposing viewpoints and sets of values. The predominant musical motif throughout the play is church music. The production notes state that, even before the curtain rises, David's piano music, emanating from the church, can be heard underneath the random street noises. The opening scene of the play is essentially a church service, alternating Margaret's sermon with the singing of hymns by the congregation, accompanied by David's piano. In addition, throughout the play, members of the congregation spontaneously break into the singing of hymns.

Before Luke's unexpected arrival at Margaret's apartment, David has already chosen a path away from church music and toward jazz music. Although he has told his mother that he has enrolled in a local music school, he has also been secretly sneaking out at night to attend jazz clubs and play in a jazz combo. It is later revealed that he had gone one night to watch his father, whom he hadn't seen in years, play trombone in a jazz band. Jazz music, however, while central to the play thematically, is only actually heard on the stage during a few key scenes. When Luke first appears unexpectedly in Margaret's apartment, the stage directions indicate that "Jazz version of 'Luke's Theme' begins." Luke thus symbolically brings the values associated with jazz into Margaret's realm of church music. When David brings a phonograph into the room where Luke lies dying and plays a record of Luke's trombone music, the sound of jazz music provides the audience with a visceral contrast to the hymnal music which has, up to this point, dominated the play. The playing of this record is furthermore an important point of contact between father and son; it represents David's decision to follow in his father's footsteps in the pursuit of a career as a jazz musician. David's association of his father with jazz music is in fact what led him to pursue music; he tells Luke that "I remembered how you used to play for me sometimes. That was why I started playing the piano. I

used to go to sleep dreaming about the way we'd play together one day, me with my piano and you with your trombone." This exchange between David and Luke furthermore provides a point of connection between father and son in which David rejects his mother's system of values (as represented by church music) and takes on his father's system of values (as represented by jazz music). For David, entering the world of jazz leads to a loss of religious faith. He tells Luke that, after he was asked to join a jazz combo, he "stopped praying," and that, eventually, "I stopped believing it just went away." Luke admits that he, himself, never found religious faith.

When David comes home one morning smelling of whiskey, Margaret associates his pursuit of jazz with "wickedness" and "sin"; she particularly associates it with sex, as she accuses David of "stinking of whiskey and some no-count, dirty, black girl's sweat." For David, however, playing jazz music is a calling, equivalent to a religious calling. He tells Margaret that, while he "can't play piano in church no more," playing jazz is something he's "got to do!" For David, playing jazz is equivalent to a religious calling in the sense that he feels he's got "work to do" in the world, by "speaking for" his fellow African Americans through his music. He tells Margaret: "I've got my work to do, something's happening in the world out there, I got to go! I know you think I don't know what's happening, but I'm beginning to see something. ... Who's going to speak for all of us? I can't stay home. Maybe I can say something one day maybe I can say something that's never been said before." Thus, while Margaret associates jazz music with "wickedness" and "sin," David perceives jazz to be essentially equivalent to religion in the sense of having an important, positive effect on the world.

The conflict between Margaret's associations of jazz with wickedness and sin and David's associations of jazz with a religious calling is representative of the seemingly conflicting associations jazz music has acquired through history. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, while jazz developed in the twentieth century in the urban settings of brothels and bars, it's musical roots are firmly planted in the "spirituals" born of the adaptation by African slaves in America to Christian hymnals:

This vast influence of Africanized church music on the development of jazz underlines one more fallacy about the music, which is that it was always linked irrevocably to the lowlife. Its connections with the brothels of Louisiana and the saloons of Chicago tell only half the story, for jazz has been concerned with sanctity as well as with sin, has been a sacred music as well as a profane one. Its links with Christianity and particularly with the act of worship and the rituals of birth, marriage, and death have proved so durable that they remain unbroken to this day.

Thus, while Margaret associates jazz only with the profane, David is more accurate in his association of jazz with a religious calling and positive social force. Furthermore, the historic and musical relationship of jazz music to church music is indicated by Margaret's decision to allow "drums and trumpets" to be played during a church service. When Sister Rice asks if these instruments "seem kind of worldly," Margaret responds: "Well, the evil ain't in the drum, Sister Rice, nor yet in the trumpet. The evil is in what folks do with it and what it leads them to. Ain't no harm in praising the Lord with anything you get in your hands." Brother Boxer then suggests that, while David hasn't been to

services in a week, these "drums and trumpets," instruments associated with jazz music, will "bring Brother David out to church again, I guarantee you that." While she herself is not aware of it, Margaret's decision to allow these more flamboyant instruments into her church is indicative of the common musical ancestry of jazz and church music. Furthermore, her statement that "Ain't no harm in praising the Lord with anything you get in your hands," suggests that David's ultimate decision to pursue jazz rather than church music may constitute his own form of "praising the Lord" through the expression of his musical gifts.

From Luke's perspective, as from David's, jazz music represents a positive life force, associated with human love. When Margaret tells Luke that David has gone to pursue life as a jazz musician, Luke responds that "He's gone into the world. He's into the world! . . . He's in the world, he's living. .. . He's living. He's living." The association of Luke with jazz, as representative of life, and human love, is evoked when, in their final interaction before Luke dies, Margaret and Luke are symbolically remarried. He tells Margaret, who is wearing her white robe for conducting church service, "You all in white. Like you was the day we got married. You mighty pretty." Margaret recalls that they were married on a sunny day, to which Luke responds, "They used to say, 'Happy is the bride the sun shines on.'"

In the final minutes of the play, Luke dies in Margaret's arms, just as she has finally admitted to herself and Luke that she still loves him and has always loved him: "Maybe it's not possible to stop loving anybody you ever really loved. I never stopped loving you, Luke. I tried. But I never stopped loving you." As Margaret and Luke embrace, the music of "The Old Ship of Zion," sung by the congregation, is heard emanating from the church, where Sister Moore is leading the sermon. As Luke dies, the mouthpiece to his trombone falls out of his hands to the floor. Margaret sees the mouthpiece and picks it up. As the congregation sings "I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table," Margaret then enters the church, "Still holding Luke's mouthpiece clenched against her breast." Luke's trombone mouthpiece symbolizes jazz music and the values of life and human love he espoused. Margaret's gesture of holding the mouthpiece "clenched against her breast" symbolizes her decision to embrace Luke, her human love for him, and "life." Margaret's changed perspective, whereby she comes to understand that human love is not opposed to religion, but is in fact embraced by religion, is expressed through her final words to the congregation, which has decided to oust her as their pastor: "I'm just now finding out what it means to love the Lord.... To love the Lord is to love all His children all of them, everyone! and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!" As Margaret steps down from the pulpit (presumably still holding Luke's mouthpiece), Sister Moore leads the congregation in a "final song of jubilation." Walking away from the church and sounds of the hymn to enter the bedroom where Luke lies dead, Margaret symbolically distances herself from her former religious convictions and moves toward Luke's jazz world of life and human love. Margaret's final act of removing her white robe and falling beside Luke on the bed also carries sexual connotations; after years of renouncing earthly love, Margaret has finally returned to her marriage bed.

Source: *Liz Brent, in an essay for Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Discussed within this essay is the viewpoint that The Amen Corner is strictly a "religious drama."

Sometimes the phrase "religious drama" is applied by Baldwin's critics to his first dramatic effort, *The Amen Corner.* This meaningless and inappropriate epithet reflects a superficial grasp of the more significant aspects of the drama. It is a categorization which precisely points up the reason many critics are unable to analyze the broader philosophical aspects that dominate the play. They cannot view the *whole* drama of conflict because religion, the *par*t, has obscured their view. Perhaps also, the critics have fallen victim to the idea that the black man's world is a sphere of religious and racial consciousness, and therefore it is expected that the theme of religion should dominate his writings in the instances where race has failed to prevail. I suggest that *Amen* is not a "religious drama" but rather a drama of interpersonal conflict, set against the background of a storefront Holy Roller church in Harlem. Only if we view the drama from this perspective can we discover the deeper human emotions and involvements with which the playwright is concerned.

Near the opening of *The Amen Comer* it becomes obvious that Margaret Alexander, the church's pastor, has fled the world of reality to take refuge not in religion but in illusion and self-deception. We find her in the midst of a homiletic rejoinder to the congregation's concepts of religion: "Some of you say, 'Ain't no harm in reading the funny papers.' But children, *yes*, there's harm in it. While you reading them funny papers, your mind ain't on the Lord. And if your mind ain't stayed on Him, every hour of the day, Satan's going to cause you to fall. Amen! Some of you say, 'Ain't no harm in me working for a liquor company. I ain't going to be drinking the liquor, I'm just going to be driving the truck!' But a saint ain't got no business delivering liquor to folks all day ..."

This admonition raises the ancient, yet valid question of whether or not some objects can be considered intrinsically good or evil apart from their social context. Obviously, Margaret's response would be affirmative. But illusion suggests confusion, and even Margaret is not always consistent in her attitude. When she is questioned about the "worldliness" of the drums and trumpets that the Philadelphia church members plan to bring to New York, she tells Sister Rice that "the evil is in what folks do with [the drum or trumpet] and what it leads them to. Ain't no harm in praising the Lord with anything you get in your hands".

But that "anything" does not include a liquor truck. Sister Boxer recognizes this incongruity and continues her challenge: "Well, ain't a truck a *thing?* And if it's all right to blow a trumpet in church, why ain't it all right for Joel to drive that truck, so he can contribute a little more to the house of God?". Margaret replies simply that there is "all the difference in the world." She can clearly see that a musical instrument has no intrinsic moral significance, but she fails to regard the liquor truck in that same light.

Another theme in the play concerns the perversion of one of the basic concepts of Christianity: humanitarianism. The foundation of Christian doctrine rests on the compassion and sympathy of one human being for another the saved and the unsaved and we would expect that one as holy as Margaret would practice what she preaches. Yet we are struck by a merciless, hypocritical piety which becomes apparent when Luke returns home and collapses. In spite of her husband's need, Margaret refuses to postpone her trip to Philadelphia because "the Lord made me leave that man in there a long time ago because he was a sinner. And the Lord ain't told me to stop my work ... ". Here we have the curious paradox of the woman of God who refuses to help an unsaved brother her husband precisely because he is a "sinner." Margaret has other souls to save.

When we consider the allusions to fancy cars and good times which the Philadelphia congregation seems to enjoy, the ostensible purpose for her visit lies open to question. This is particularly true in light of the apparent neglect of her own congregation, as seen when Sister Moore raises the question of Margaret's visit to Sister Rice's mother while Sister Boxer listens. The two women begin to empathize with Margaret because the Philadelphia visits have left her with her "hands full," but Sister Boxer recognizes the hypocrisy inherent in their pastor's priorities and counters, "She got her hands full right down there in her own house. Reckon she couldn't get over to pray for your mother, Sister Rice, she couldn't stay here to pray for her own husband".

The social significance of the play, as I have suggested, is paramount. On this level the familiar Baldwin theme of the search for identity becomes apparent. Standley's succinct analysis of the significance of this quest in Baldwin's writings provides a context for my consideration here:

This search or quest for identity is indispensable in Baldwin's opinion, and the failure to experience such is indicative of a fatal weakness in human life.

The quest for identity always involves a man with other men there can be no self-perception apart from or outside the context of interpersonal relationships. Only within the dynamic interplay of personalities can men become profoundly aware of the significance of being a man. Baldwin sees the lack of interpersonal relations as explicitly related to the breakdown of communication between persons specifically 'the breakdown of communication between the sexes'....

Luke appears in Act I, and we soon discover that David believes his father had abandoned him. But it is Margaret who is guilty of desertion. She had interpreted the death of their second baby as a sign from the Lord to leave her husband and find a "hiding place." She finds sanctuary in the church because all other doors are closed to her, and she begins her quest for self as a minister of God. But, as Standley' s comments indicate, Margaret has made a tragic mistake which is revealed when Mrs. Jackson comes forward to have Margaret pray for her ailing baby:

MARGARET: Maybe the Lord wants you to leave that man.

MRS. JACKSON: No! He don't want that!

Mrs. Jackson refuses Margaret's advice because she has already discovered that her identity can only be achieved through an open line of communication with her husband. Margaret has yet to realize this.

The parallel story of the two women becomes even more significant when we consider the sharp contrast which Baldwin makes. In Act III, after her baby has died, Mrs. Jackson tells Margaret, "I ain't like you, Sister Margaret. I don't want all this, all these people looking to me. I'm just a young woman, I just want my man and my home and my children". Margaret, too, had lost a child when she was a young woman but instead of standing by Luke, she nagged him to drink because she felt that he was responsible for the baby's death. She deprived Luke and David of the family relationship which each needed so badly, though no more than she herself required. And as Mrs. Jackson stands alone in the church a young woman who has just lost her second child she is bewildered and perplexed. Margaret, however, begins to see her own mistake from the past. Realizing that she has taken the wrong road, Margaret reverses the advice that she had given to Mrs. Jackson prior to the baby's death. "Go on home to your husband," she advises compassionately. "Go on home to your man".

In all probability, Luke is the most sensitive and perceptive character in the play. In one of the most memorable scenes, he describes his suffering, and we are moved to empathy and pity. He tells David that he has failed in his quest for identity not because of his music but because he has been denied the most basic human quality love: "I don't believe no man ever got to ... [who he is inside] without somebody loved him. Somebody looked at him, looked way down there and showed him to himself and then started pulling, a-pulling of him up so he could live". Luke realizes that Margaret's distorted sense of reality has precluded the extension of her love and understanding, thereby denying David the pursuit of his manhood. He knows that any efforts either to prescribe the terms of that quest or to protect him from its consequences can only result in the pain and misery of failure which he himself knows only too well. Luke has learned that a man must strike out, against the odds, if necessary, to discover the meaning of his own life. And he encourages David to take the first step toward reaching that goal.

Baldwin skillfully uses the contrasting qualities of vision and blindness to symbolize Margaret's lack of inner sight as compared to that possessed by Luke. This juxtaposition becomes particularly significant near the end of the drama, as the two parents discuss the boy Margaret as if he were dead, Luke affirming that he is alive:

MARGARET: He's gone.

LUKE: He's gone into the world. He's gone into the world!

MARGARET: Luke, you won't never see your son no more.

LUKE: But I seen him one last time. He's in the world, he's living.

MARGARET: He's gone. Away from you and away from me.

LUKE: He's living. He's living. Is you got to see your God to know he's living?

The references to "dark" and "white" further serve to draw our attention to the contrasting moods and heighten our awareness of these two different reactions to the boy's departure:

MARGARET: Everything is dark this morning.

LUKE: You all in white

Luke's subsequent death occasions Margaret's remorse and enhances the cognizance of her own identity. She is forced into a reexamination of those values that have precipitated her misfortune, and she emerges in the final scene with a fuller understanding of the error of her ways: "Her triumph .. . is that ... although she has lost everything, [she] also gains the keys to the kingdom. The kingdom is love, and love is selfless, although only the self can lead one there. She gains herself'.

Source: Louis H. Pratt, "The Darkness Within," in *James Baldwin*, Twayne Publishers, 1978, pp. 83-87.

Critical Essay #3

Stanley Macebuh's essay offers a brief look into the background of James Baldwin and touches on the making of The Amen Corner.

James Baldwin's continuous attempts to come to terms with his inheritance in the Western world have earned him a certain genteel notoriety in the history of American letters. The passionately apocalyptic vision, the pained discomfiture in the realm of morals, the evangelistic fervor and the biblical rhetoric are elements in his writings that ultimately derive from his long apprenticeship and briefer ministry in the Black Church in Harlem. From a more technical perspective, also, the extent to which he has so far shown an ability to control the fictional form is clearly not unrelated to the rhetorical practices of the Black Ministry; but beyond the generalized and now somewhat mandatory notices that have been made between the mood of his writings and his personal history, little serious attempt has so far been made to identify the precise manner in which his religious background has been for him both a source of creative inspiration and of conceptual and psychological constraint.

Students of the history of the Black Church in America are agreed that the practice of Black Christianity has always been ambiguous in its objectives; they will admit that while its joyless rejection of the things of the world in favour of a hypothetical paradise was more akin to the dreams of the early Christians, its very faith in the possibility of another, better world was in itself a subjective response to the actual condition of its members. While, that is, the rhetoric of the city of God may have been a somewhat impractical indulgence, the very mythology of Black Christianity, with its curiously appropriate analogies to the biblical accounts of the Jewish exile, may also be seen as a strategy of guarded political protest. For those who are overwhelmed by the often fatal inequities of their social condition, there is an understandable temptation to reject the real world as evil, and this rejection is often accompanied by a feverish anticipation of the millennial Eden, of an age in which there shall be neither pain nor injustice.

"To a people without circumstantial hope", Reuben Sheres has written, "(the Black Church) offered the hope of the by and by ... The circumstances of the existing world were bad enough that (sic) they needed to be denied or rejected ... and in their place was substituted the hope of the world to come".

The oppressed, it is true, cannot make any exclusive claims to the knowledge of evil, but it is also true that when understood as much in its social as in its metaphysical meaning, evil is a reality with which they are only too familiar. That the congregations of the Black Church should thus have been preoccupied with the celestial city is, therefore, quite understandable, but it should also be emphasized that its millennialism was, almost by definition, equally a strategy of protest, an expression of dissatisfaction with the real condition of the members of these congregations. Indeed, the very transformation of the Church from an 'invisible institution' to an established and transparently Black organization was, in itself, an act of moderate defiance, a gesture of denunciation of the inhumanity of the older, white churches; and the long line of

ministers and preachers who, through the history of this church have seen and taken advantage of the possibilities of social leadership offered by it is, clearly, an indication of its political significance.

Nevertheless, despite the implication of 'protest' that is involved in any definition of utopianism, religious or political, it must be observed that the true strength of the Black Church lay rather in the power of its metaphorical evocations than in any actual confrontations it may have had with white oppression. Lawrence Jones' observations in this regard are no doubt well-meaning enough, but he rather strains credibility when he claims that ... viewed through the prism of present rhetoric, it becomes clear that one of the issues being contested in the founding of the Black Churches was Black Power.

The Black minister, it is true, occasionally managed to acquire a measure of actual political influence in proportion to the size of his congregation, as shown by the more recent example of Martin Luther King's meteoric career; but in general, political protest in the Black Church was a matter of analogical references to biblical history. The generic white man was Pharaoh, from whose oppression a black Moses was some day to arise to rescue his brethren, and America was Egypt, the land of sin and evil and godlessness that was doomed to suffer the brunt of God's fiery vengeance. There were compelling practical reasons for this preference for indirect imagery. The certainty of furious reprisals, of the white backlash, ensured that the 'protest' of the Black Church should be couched in such terms as to render it lame and largely unavailing. And in a world in which terror and suffering were more real than the possibility of ideal justice in society, the feverish anticipation of bliss in heaven became a more rewarding exercise than any attempt to confront the evil in the actual world.

The millennialism and the metaphorical protest in Black Christianity are two major elements that were later to be dramatized in Baldwin's writings, but there was a third element which, in our opinion, is even more significant for an understanding of Baldwin's career so far. We have seen how, in response to the actual suffering of its members, the Black Church evolved a theology in which the promise of the celestial city took on a lurid fascination for them, and we have suggested that practical considerations of safety contributed to the rhetorical extravagances of this theology. For the preacher who contemplated the plight of his congregation, safety, the evasion or assuagement of white anger, lay in metaphor, in indirect statement. He could offer them citizenship in heaven, and he could inveigh against the corruption of Sodom and Gomorrah, against the oppression of the Pharaohs with far more impunity than he could decry, in straightforward language, their real suffering. But he knew also, with a chill puritan certainty, that not all his flock would automatically gain entrance into heaven. Promising them the city of God, he also reminded them of the visitation of God's anger on all who chose the path of evil and sin. And since he knew how much more accessible the path of damnation was, his predictions of doom were even more passionate than his promises of divine intervention. And so he left in the minds of his congregation an indelible fear, a vision of their corruption, of the dangers they courted if they were ensnared by the temptations of the white man's world.

Such was the theology of Baldwin's adolescence in America. Everywhere he turned he saw the manifestations of sin. The Harlem of his boyhood was, and still is, as close to an illustration of the contours of hell as could be found anywhere in the real world. At home, his father was a discontented, imperious patriarch whose single-minded religious fervor was as formidable as his permanent rage; at school and on the streets, he saw only omens of his own personal corruptibility. Under such conditions, it was not inevitable that Baldwin should see the social horror around him primarily as a paradigm of metaphysical evil; but given the pervading squalor, both of spirit and of environment that he saw around him, it is perhaps understandable that he should have felt he had no right to expect to be spared the fate of his friends and playmates. At fourteen he entered the church in search of safety, having convinced himself that safety was 'synonymous with God'. Four years later he was out of the church; it had given him little more than the illusion of safety, and it had sought to curtail both his freedom of action and of imagination. It was at this time that he took the curiously not unrelated decision of becoming a writer.

Source: Stanley Macebuh, "The Amen Corner," in *James Baldwin*: A Critical Study, Third Press, 1973, pp. 29-33.

Topics for Further Study

In addition to plays and novels, Baldwin has been celebrated for his essays on issues of race in America. Read one of Baldwin's essays, such as from his collections: *Notes from a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), or *The Fire Next Time* (1963). What are some of Baldwin's central concerns with the issue of race in America? What solutions does he suggest for addressing issues of racial inequality? In what ways are these concerns addressed in his play *The Amen Corner*!

Pick a particularly moving or important scene from *The Amen Comer* to perform with another student (or students). How does performing a scene from the play help you to understand the motivations of certain characters or to illuminate key thematic concerns of the play? In what ways could different performance choices affect the meaning, effect, or impact of that particular scene?

Baldwin's play addresses issues of race and poverty in terms of the significance of the black church to an African-American family. Learn more about the role of the church in the history of African-American culture and the struggles of African Americans for racial equality in America. In what ways has religion and the institution of the church been an important factor in African-American history and African-American communities?

Baldwin's play focuses on the role of the wife and mother in an African-American family. Another important and much celebrated African-American playwright who addresses the role of African-American women in the black family is Ntozake Shange, who is best known for her play *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*. Learn more about this playwright and her works. In what ways does she address similar issues to those addressed by Baldwin in his play? In what ways does she provide a different perspective on male-female relationships in the African-American community?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: The Harlem Renaissance characterizes a period of flowering of African-American literature.

1960s: The Black Arts Movement, also called the Black Aesthetic Movement, inspired in part by the Civil Rights Movement, represents the cutting edge of African-American artistic and literary style and philosophy.

1990s: A new generation of African-American writers and artists have been greatly influenced by the legacy of the Black Arts Movement.

1950s: The most prominent Black theaters in the United States include the American Negro Theater and the Negro Playwrights' Company.

1960s: Inspired by, and in part an initiator of, the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka establishes the Black Repertory Theater in Harlem.

1990s: Numerous black theaters have been established throughout the United States, with many mainstream stages also featuring black theatrical productions.

1954: In the decision of *Brown vs. the Board of Education,* the Supreme Court declares that racially segregated schools are unconstitutional. This initiates the desegregation of public schools in the United States.

1955: Rosa Parks initiates the Montgomery bus boycott in protest against seating segregation on public buses.

1961: Over 70,000 college students, in what are called "Freedom Rides," travel to the South to register black voters.

1964: An extensive Civil Rights Act is passed by Congress, declaring various forms of racial discrimination illegal.

1965: The Voting Rights Act is passed to protect African Americans against discriminatory tactics in regard to voting.

1963: President John F. Kennedy is assassinated.

1964: Martin Luther King, Jr., is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his achievements in the Civil Rights Movement.

1965: Black Muslim leader Malcolm X, who promoted Black Nationalism, is assassinated.

1966: The Black Panther Party, a revolutionary organization of African Americans, is founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale.

1968: Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated.

1980s: The Black Panther party is essentially disbanded.

What Do I Read Next?

Blues for Mr. Charlie (1964), Baldwin's most noted play, was performed on Broadway in 1964 and received a Foreign Drama Critics Award. "Mr. Charlie" is a name used to refer to the white man.

Notes of a Native Son (1955) is Baldwin's first collection of essays on issues of race in America.

Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son (1961) is Baldwin's second collection of essays on racial relations in America.

The Fire Next Time (1963) is an essay by Baldwin based on an article published in the *New Yorker* magazine in 1962, and addresses issues of racial relations in America.

Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) is Baldwin's first novel and the work for which he is best known and most celebrated. It is an autobiographical account of Baldwin's childhood and early religious influences.

Giovanni's Room (1977) is Baldwin's second novel and concerns a young man in Paris struggling with his sexual identity.

Native Son (1955) is a novel by the celebrated African-American writer Richard Wright, who was an important role model for Baldwin and important early influence on his writing career.

Further Study

Baraka, Amiri (LeRoi Jones), *The Dutchman and the Slave Ship*: Two Plays, Morrow, 1964.

These two plays are critically acclaimed pieces by one of the leading writers of the Blacks Arts Movement.

Harris, Trudier, *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*, University of Tennessee Press, 1985.

This book is a critical assessment of the female characters in Baldwin's fiction.

Jones, LeRoi (Imamu Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of African-American Writing*, Morrow, 1968.

This text is an important collection of works emanating from the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s.

Leeming, David Adams, *James Baldwin: A Biography*, Knopf, 1994.

Leeming's book is a recent and highly enjoyable biography of Baldwin.

Shange, Ntozake, *for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf: A Choreopoem*, Scribner Poetry, 1997.

Shange's play is an important experimental dramatic work (first published in 1977) that emerged from the Black Arts Movement. It addresses issues of African-American women in terms of racism and sexism.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

BOOKRAGS

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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