

Going to Meet the Man Study Guide

Going to Meet the Man by James Baldwin

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Going to Meet the Man Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
The Rockpile.....	3
The Outing.....	5
The Man Child.....	7
Previous Condition.....	9
Sonny's Blues.....	11
This Morning, This Evening, So Soon.....	13
Come Out the Wilderness.....	15
Going to Meet the Man.....	17
Characters.....	18
Objects/Places.....	22
Themes.....	24
Style.....	26
Quotes.....	28
Topics for Discussion.....	29



The Rockpile

The Rockpile Summary

The rockpile is a pile of rocks in a vacant lot across the street from the Grimes' family apartment house. No one knows why the rocks are there, but the children have been told that moving the rocks could cause the subway below them to crash and kill everyone inside, therefore the children have been willing to obey orders to stay away from the rockpile. However, every Saturday the Grimes' boys, John and Roy, often sit on the fire escape outside their apartment and watch other boys play on the rockpile. One day Roy decides to go to the rockpile with a group of his friends who call to him as they walked by. Roy promises John he will only go for five minutes and makes John promise he will not tell their mother.

John becomes distracted by a drawing of a locomotive he has been working on. When John finally looks up, it has been much more than five minutes. A fight has broken out on the rockpile with boys throwing everything from rocks to pop bottles. A can flies toward Roy and he does not duck in time. Roy falls over and begins to bleed. In a moment Roy is screaming for his mother. Someone carries him home where Elizabeth Grimes, and her friend Sister McCandless, soothe him and bandage his wound. Elizabeth becomes concerned about what her husband will say when he learns the boys have been playing on the rockpile. Elizabeth demands to know why John did not tell her where Roy had gone. When they hear Gabriel coming up the stairs, Sister McCandless goes to intercept and hopefully keep him calm.

Gabriel is highly religious and is a deacon in his church. For this reason, Gabriel tends to be rigid with his children. Elizabeth worries how Gabriel will react to Roy's injury. Gabriel comes into the room and kneels beside his son, anxious to see the wound and to be sure it does not require a doctor's care. Elizabeth goes to retrieve their daughter who is crying in another room, thinking how these are hers and Gabriel's children, but John is not. When she returns to the room, Gabriel turns on her, demanding to know why Roy was playing on the rockpile. When Gabriel learns that John knew where Roy had gone but had not told anyone, Gabriel turns his rage on the child. Elizabeth is frightened, but more frightened that Gabriel will turn his anger on her than she is for her child. Elizabeth instructs John to pick up his father's lunch pail even though she knows this will put his head dangerously close to Gabriel's workboot.

The Rockpile Analysis

This story begins as a summertime reminiscence themed story. However, it quickly grows dark as the reader learns that a neighbor lost their child in a swimming accident. The narrator continues by expressing how the Grimes children are forbidden to do anything that might corrupt their souls, including playing on a simple rockpile. It is soon clear that the patriarch of the Grimes family is a heavy-handed, abusive man. When one



of the boys decides to play on the rockpile despite being told not to, it becomes even clearer how dangerous the father can be. However, it is not this rebellious boy who becomes the target of his father's wrath, but his older brother. When the reader learns that John is not Gabriel's biological son, it all becomes clear. Gabriel is angry with his wife for not being pure when they married and angry with John for being a daily reminder of his wife's sins. Gabriel turns his wrath on John and his wife allows it, aware that if not John, it would be her who would suffer her husband's wrath. This not only illustrates Gabriel's anger, but his hypocrisy in forbidding moral corruption for his children but using violence to keep them in line.



The Outing

The Outing Summary

The church has an outing every summer, usually on the Fourth of July so that everyone is off from work. The church invites the whole community, so there are often non-believers included in these trips. This year, John and Roy have invited their friend David and his mother. David often goes to church with the Grimes, but he is not a member of the congregation. The outing also happens to fall close to Sylvia's birthday, a young girl the three boys admire, so they plan to give her a gold plated butterfly brooch they bought for her together. However, the boys are unsure how they are going to get Sylvia alone to offer her the gift.

Once on the boat, the boys go to speak to Sylvia and her mother, but are out of luck in getting her alone for a few minutes. Brother Elisha, a young member of the congregation, has become attached to her and seems unwilling to leave. Gabriel Grimes, Roy and John's father, joins the conversation. Just before he walks away, Gabriel makes a point of telling John to behave. John, bolstered by his friends, makes a snide comment to his father. Gabriel becomes angry, but is powerless to do anything in front of so many people.

Lunch begins and everyone eats out of their baskets, enjoying the party atmosphere. Conversations abound, many about the state of everyone's souls. The members of the congregation want to save the souls of sinners and encourage them to join their church. The boys escape this conversation and go exploring around the boat. At one point John and David find themselves alone. They take advantage of the moment to embrace.

The pastor conducts a church service on the boat just before they reach their destination. David, John, and Roy join them after the service has begun. As members of the congregation are filled with the spirit and begin to testify, David begins to feel like a sinner, a feeling that leaves him depressed and dissatisfied.

The boat arrives at Bear Mountain and the community scatters, some going to swim while others go hiking or have picnics in the grass. The boys watch Sylvia and wait for a moment to give her the brooch. Again it appears that Sylvia's mother and Brother Elisha are stuck to her side. However, Sister Daniels leaves to go to the restroom and Brother Elisha goes in search of lemonade for Sylvia. David and Roy approach Sylvia. John has gotten frustrated and given up, but now David and Roy are able to give Sylvia the brooch. Sylvia is touched by the gift and offers her thanks. Then Sylvia begins to ask David why he is not saved. Sylvia asks David to attend the revival meetings. Later, John can sense a difference in David and he is unhappy.

The Outing Analysis

The outing is a religious trip that is meant to encourage sinners to become church members. This is an important event in the Grimes household because it is an opportunity to get out and do something different. However, it does not soften Gabriel Grimes' attitude toward John. In fact, John and Gabriel have words that cause Gabriel to become very angry, but he is unable to do anything because of the people around them. Gabriel's restraint suggests to the reader that he is aware that his violent behavior goes against church teachings, but in the privacy of his own home he is not as concerned as he might be around other church members.

This story gives the reader more insight into John. It appears that John is a homosexual who is in love with one of his young friends, a boy named David. David appears to return John's feelings, but church services that preach against homosexuality makes David feel as though he is a bad person for loving John. Instead, David focuses on Sylvia, a young girl in the church who has asked David to become a member and to find salvation. This causes John a great deal of heartache and suggests a reality that John might not be ready to face on top of the violence he receives from his father.



The Man Child

The Man Child Summary

Eric is walking across the fields that belong to his father, returning home in time for supper. Eric is concerned that his mother will be angry with him for being out so long. Eric knows his father will already be at the local bar, The Rafters, with his friend Jamie, but his mother will be at home waiting. Eric does not like to upset his mother. His mother has only recently returned from being in the hospital after losing a baby she carried in her belly. This is the second baby she has lost. The first was supposed to be Eric's sister, but she is in a grave in the cemetery.

As Eric walks, he thinks about his father's friend Jamie and the birthday party they had for him a few months back. At that party, Jamie and Eric's father become very drunk. At one point, Eric's father tells Jamie to quit torturing his dog. Jamie becomes angry, telling Eric's father he could do whatever he wanted with his belongings. The conversation then turns to the wife Jamie once had who ran away because she believed Jamie did not care for her. As they talk, Eric lies on the ground and falls asleep. When he wakes, his father and mother are still talking to Jamie. The conversation turns from Jamie's runaway wife to the land that Eric's father bought from Jamie because Jamie could not care for it. Eric's father tells Jamie he needs to grow up and one day he might have everything that Eric's father has. Jamie becomes angry.

Eric's father takes Eric for a walk. His father tells Eric that all the land he sees will be his one day. Eric's father explains that his father worked hard for this land and he did too and one day Eric would have children and it would be theirs too. Eric asks if Jamie will ever have a son and Eric's father tells him no because Jamie is still a child in a grown body. It is only a short time after this that Eric's mother has to go to the hospital and her baby goes away. When Eric's mother returns, Eric notices a change in her toward Jamie that he cannot explain.

Eric arrives back at the house and his mother sends him to the water pump to clean up. As Eric is washing his face, Jamie comes to him and says his father wants to see him in the barn. Eric asks if the new calf has been born and Jamie says it has. However, Jamie takes him to a barn that does not house the cows. Jamie asks what is going on and Jamie grabs him, choking him. Eric tries to convince Jamie he does not have to kill him, that he will give him all the land. Jamie says it is not about the land and he breaks Eric's neck even as he hears his mother calling for him. Jamie then goes home to collect his dog and join Eric's father at The Rafters.

The Man Child Analysis

This story is a complex story about a relationship between a man and his best friend. Eric's father has known Jamie all his life. However, Eric's father has grown up and



accepted the responsibilities of adulthood. Jamie, on the other hand, has always been something of a screw-up and as a result he lost a wife and his land. This difference between the two men is something of a sore spot between them, something that becomes obvious at Jamie's birthday party.

Eric is something of an unreliable narrator because of his age and his inability to understand what is going on in the adult world. Eric knows his mother has lost two babies that should have been his siblings, but he does not know how or why. Eric is also aware that after the latest miscarriage his mother is no longer comfortable with Jamie, but he does not know why. When Jamie attacks Eric, the reader realizes that Jamie must be responsible for the deaths of the babies too somehow. When Eric asks Jamie if his attack is because of the land, Jamie says no. This confuses Eric, but the reader realizes Jamie's actions have to do with a sort of competition between him and Eric's father.



Previous Condition

Previous Condition Summary

Peter is an actor who has just returned from a show he was in in Chicago. Peter is staying in a dirty, depressing room his friend Jules Weissman has rented for him. Peter is afraid of what might happen when the landlady learns he is living there, so he tries to leave after everyone else in the morning and return only after everyone has gone to bed. Unfortunately, Peter has been seen by a few tenants. After three days, the landlady comes to his door and insists he leave. When she threatens to call the police, Peter agrees to leave.

Peter goes to Jules' house and tells him what happened. Jules suggests Peter fight the unfair eviction, but Peter is reluctant to fight, sure it would not prove anything. Peter and Jules argue over it, with Peter insisting that discrimination is worse against the blacks and even a Jewish man would never understand.

That night, Peter has dinner with Ida, a white woman who is married to a rich ballet dancer. Ida and her husband have an open marriage, allowing Ida to take lovers. Peter has been her lover for several years. At dinner, Peter tells Ida about the eviction and she also pressures him to fight it. When Peter refuses, Ida argues with him, eventually hitting him with a fork in an affectionate reprimand that causes Peter to become irate. Peter stands and screams at Ida, causing the waiter to come to her rescue.

After dinner, Peter makes an excuse to leave, even though Ida wants to spend more time with him. They agree to meet the following day. On the way home, Peter goes to Harlem and stops at a black bar. A woman at the bar tries to flirt with Peter, but he shuts her off immediately. However, after a few drinks and the realization that he does not fit into this world either, Peter offers to buy the woman and her friend a drink.

Previous Condition Analysis

This story is about a black man living in a world that is not always kind to blacks. Peter moves into a rented room, but the white landlady forces him to leave because she does not rent to blacks. This tells the reader that the setting of this novel is most likely in the 1950s or 1960s when this type of racial discrimination was most often utilized. Peter is angry at this unfair eviction, but he refuses to fight it even when his white friends try to convince him he should. Instead, Peter becomes angry and feels conspicuous in the world he has chosen to live in, as though he does not fit there.

When Peter becomes disillusioned with his life in the white world, he goes to Harlem to drink in a black bar. However, even here Peter realizes he does not truly fit in because of his lifestyle and his friends. Peter feels just as conspicuous in this world as he did in the other. Peter is an actor, though, and he begins to flirt with a couple of women to help him feel more a part of their world, their life.

The title "Previous Condition" suggests that Peter has failed in his life because of his race, that his race is his previous condition. It is a condition that Peter is not happy with and he tries to change it, but in the black world his life in the white one becomes his previous condition, therefore he does not fit in anywhere.



Sonny's Blues

Sonny's Blues Summary

A teacher in Harlem reads in the newspaper that there was a raid on an apartment downtown and his brother was arrested for selling and using heroin. After school, the teacher runs into an old friend of his brother who tells him that the police will clean his brother up and release him, but that most likely will not cure him of his addiction. The man also tells the teacher that he feels guilty because he feels like he encouraged the brother, Sonny, to start using heroin. The teacher does not attempt to contact his brother at first, but when he finally writes him after his own daughter dies, he feels guilty for not having done it before. From then on, the teacher writes his brother regularly.

When Sonny is released from prison, he comes to Harlem and moves in with his brother. The first night Sonny is in his home, the teacher thinks about his young daughter, who died of polio just after her second birthday. The teacher then thinks of his mother, who told him a story, just after his father died. The story was of the night his uncle, an uncle he did not know he had, was hit by a car driven by a white man and killed. The mother uses this story to show the teacher how important it is that he care for his brother. The teacher promises to always be there for Sonny. However, the teacher is in the army at the time and living out of the country. When his mother dies, the teacher returns to bury her and take custody of his still underaged brother. The teacher asks Sonny what he wants to do with his life. Sonny tells him he wants to be a jazz pianist. Sonny also says he would like to join the army or navy instead of finishing his last year of high school. The teacher refuses. Instead, he leaves Sonny with his new wife at her parents' home when he returns to service overseas.

The teacher gets letters regularly from his wife telling him about Sonny during his final months in the army. His wife says that Sonny plays the piano day and night, stopping only to meet his basic needs. When the wife's mother learns that Sonny is not attending school, they argue. Sonny disappears and the teacher later learns that he joined the navy. The teacher hears about his brother from time to time over the next several years, but does not see him again.

Now the teacher has Sonny living with him in his home and he wonders if he should search his room to make sure he is not using drugs again. Sonny comes home before the teacher can make up his mind and they talk for a time. Sonny admits that many musicians use heroin because it helps them play better and that it is possible he might one day begin taking the drug again. Sonny then asks his brother to go with him to a club that night where he will be playing.

At the club, the teacher feels as though he is related to royalty as Sonny's friends are introduced to him. When it is time for the music to begin, the teacher watches as Sonny takes his place at the piano. At first, the teacher believes that the fiddle player, Creole, is controlling the tempo, allowing Sonny to ease his way back into the music. At first it



seems that Sonny is hesitant, that he cannot fully merge himself into the music. However, Sonny eventually finds his rhythm and begins playing with all his soul, exposing his blues to the people in the club.

Sonny's Blues Analysis

Sonny is a young man from Harlem who loses his parents when he is still a teenager and is never able to forge a close relationship with his older brother. As a result, Sonny feels alone and unable to turn to anyone with his fears. Sonny knows that drugs are a natural progression in the slums, so he chooses to leave by joining the military. However, his chosen profession, jazz pianist, leads him into a different world but a world that is also governed by drugs. The placing of his talent into an inanimate object and bearing his soul is too much for Sonny's self esteem and he turns to heroin for support.

The teacher is filled with guilt over his brother's use of drugs because he did not keep a promise he made to his mother to watch over this brother. This touches on the theme of family and explores the sense of responsibility one family member often feels for another. The brothers are never close, but Sonny's struggle with drugs and the teacher's loss of his own child brings them back together and helps them to form a new bond, a mature bond based more on tragedy and friendship than family. In the end, the teacher is not sure he can trust that his brother will never use drugs again, and Sonny admits he cannot be sure either. However, when the teacher sees Sonny play his piano, he knows that Sonny will survive as long as he can connect with his music.



This Morning, This Evening, So Soon

This Morning, This Evening, So Soon Summary

The narrator watches his wife, a dark Swedish woman, dress for a night out with his sister, a teacher from the American South. As the narrator watches, he thinks about the bad mood he has been in all day because of a move he and his family are about to make to America. The narrator has lived in Paris for twelve years, except for a brief return to America eight years previously, and has grown used to the acceptance he receives there. The narrator is afraid for his son, who is of mixed blood, and the fact that he has never faced prejudice like the narrator did when he was young. The narrator does not want his son to suffer, or to look poorly on his father, as the narrator did his own.

As the women finish dressing, the narrator takes his eight year old son, Paul, downstairs to the sitter. The narrator promises to take his son to lunch the following day to celebrate their final day in Paris. Paul is excited about this trip and the sitter assures the narrator that is because it is the country of his father's birth. The narrator, however, worries that no one really understands what kind of a country it is. The women pass the narrator in the hall, on their way to say goodbye to Paul, and promise to see the narrator the following morning after their night out.

The narrator returns to his apartment to dress for his own night out with Vidal, the director of a movie the narrator stars in. As he enters the apartment, he once again feels a dark mood come over him as he looks over the packed boxes waiting for their move to America. This causes the narrator to think back on his last trip to America when he was going home for his mother's funeral. Everything was fine on the ship, in fact he sang for the other passengers during the end of voyage party. However, the attitude of the white passengers began to change toward him as they slowly made their way into the harbor in New York. When the narrator went to disembark, he found himself face to face with the same bigotry he thought he had left behind four years earlier.

The narrator hears the doorbell as he steps out of the shower. The narrator lets Vidal in and goes to finish dressing while Vidal puts on a record. When he returns to the room, the narrator and Vidal have a drink and talk. The narrator confesses his fear of taking his son to America. Vidal reminds him of a conversation they had during the filming of the movie in which Vidal encouraged the narrator to embrace the anger and pain of his childhood in order to play the part more authentically. Vidal tells the narrator that everyone has pain and the smart people use that pain to become better people.

The narrator and Vidal go to dinner and then to a club for drinks. In the club, they meet four black Americans who are huge fans of the narrator. One of these Americans, Ruth, thanks the narrator for doing what he has done and showing other blacks it can be done. The narrator and Vidal join the students for drinks. After a short time, they decide to move on to a nearby café so that one of the students can show Vidal and the narrator



how well he sings. While they are enjoying their music, the narrator notices an old friend of his, a boxer from Tunis named Boona. The narrator asks Boona to join them.

The group moves on to another club where they all take turns dancing with the two girls. One of the students approaches the narrator and tells him that Boona was seen taking money from Ruth's purse. They are upset about this, especially Ruth, who has been crying out of fear of hurting Boona. The narrator takes Boona aside and asks him about this. Boona swears he did nothing wrong. Ruth tells Boona that she does want to pursue this and tells him she is sorry for the accusations. Soon after, the party breaks up and everyone goes their own way.

The narrator rushes home, excited to spend the day with his son. Suddenly the narrator no longer feels a dark cloud hanging over him. In fact, he assures Paul that they are going on an adventure to a new world.

This Morning, This Evening, So Soon Analysis

This story relies on the setting as the source of its conflict. The setting is somewhere in the 1950s, a time when racial tension is at an all time high in the American South. The first person narrator of the story is a black man who is raised in the south and suffers the name calling and disrespect of southern bigots. As a result, this man moves to Europe where he finds a civilization that did not discriminate against blacks as openly or cruelly. The narrator has found happiness in Paris and has married a white woman from Sweden. Now he has a son whom he loves dearly.

The conflict of the story is that the narrator and his family are moving to America so that the narrator can sing at a club in New York and do a movie in Hollywood. As a result, the narrator is frightened for his son, who has never known bigotry. The narrator worries that his son will be harmed by this emotional and physical abuse. The narrator also worries that this country will change his son's opinion of him, just as the open bigotry of their neighbors changed the narrator's opinion of his own father. However, a night on the town helps relieve this fear as the narrator realizes that bigotry happens everywhere and that pain helps a person develop character. The narrator also meets some Americans who turn out to be kind and giving, showing him that not all Americans are bad and that a person can keep their innocence in the face of bigotry.



Come Out the Wilderness

Come Out the Wilderness Summary

A young black woman is living with a white artist named Paul. This girl, Ruth Bowman, is aware that Paul is on the verge of leaving her. Paul spends many nights out with his friends and she suspects he shares his time with other women. They talk that morning, nicely, but Ruth feels that Paul's suggestion that he paint her is just his way of building courage to tell her it is over.

Ruth is at work. Ruth works at an insurance company that just recently began employing blacks. Ruth and Mr. Davis, a man in an important position, are the only blacks who work there. Ruth listens to the other secretaries talk about Mr. Davis, wondering if he is married, and wonders what they would think if they knew about Paul. As Ruth waits for Paul to call her and reassure her that everything is all right, Mr. Davis calls her into his office. Mr. Davis asks Ruth if she would be interested in becoming his private secretary when specific changes are made in the office. Ruth jumps at the chance, wondering what Paul would think if he knew she would be making more money.

Paul finally calls. Paul tells Ruth that he is having lunch with a friend that day and he is going to speak with a gallery owner about a possible show. Paul then tells Ruth that the gallery owner has a daughter and makes the suggestion that he might have an affair with her if it would help his career. Ruth knows this is Paul's way of avoiding the lies that cause tensions in a relationship. However, Ruth believes this is more difficult because she has no defense should an affair happen.

Ruth goes down to lunch and runs into Mr. Davis. Mr. Davis takes Ruth to lunch and they discuss their mutual childhoods in the American South. Ruth, who had a difficult relationship with her religious parents and brother, is reluctant to reveal too much about herself. When she was young, Ruth was caught in the barn with a boy and her family assumed she had had sexual relations with the boy. This caused Ruth to feel dirty, a feeling that still overwhelms her, especially when she is with Paul. After lunch, Mr. Davis walks Ruth back to the office. On the way he asks Ruth to go out with him, but instead of answering, she insists that Mr. Davis knows nothing about her.

After work, Ruth calls home multiple times, but Paul does not answer the phone. Ruth goes to several bars. At the last one, Ruth sees a young white boy at the bar who reminds her of a boy she once dated. Ruth sees sadness in this man despite the fame she knows he will have one day in his acting career. Ruth watches him and suddenly realizes that what bothers all these white men she has loved is the fact that they want to find love in black women, but black women cannot forgive them for their dark pasts.



Come Out the Wilderness Analysis

Again the setting of this story, sometime in the 1950s or 1960s, creates the conflict that drives the story. In this story, Ruth is a young black woman who was raised by highly religious people who were often shamed by white people. As a result, Ruth herself was shamed by her own family for being with a boy in the barn. Ruth has always felt dirty since that time and associates relationships with black men with this dark moment in her life.

Ruth is having an affair with a white painter, but knows he is on the verge of breaking up with her. Ruth is saddened by this, but what is worse is that she is still in love with him even though she knows he does not love her. This causes Ruth to again feel that sense of being dirty from her childhood and makes her embarrassed and ashamed of herself. However, when a black man tries to pick her up, Ruth is repelled, believing this man knows nothing of her except that she is black. Instead, Ruth continues to focus on white men, whom she believes will never find happiness with black women because of their shameful past of slavery and bigotry.



Going to Meet the Man

Going to Meet the Man Summary

Jesse is lying in bed with his wife, frustrated because he cannot achieve an erection. Jesse's wife tells him to go to sleep because tomorrow is an important day. Jesse cannot sleep, however. Jesse tells his wife about a protest that took place in front of the jail that day. Jesse was told to make the singers stop singing after they were arrested, but he could not, so he began to beat the leader to force him to make the singers stop. The kid turned out to be the grandson of a woman Jesse once collected money from when he worked for a mail order company. Jesse was surprised to find this kid there, but not surprised by his defiant attitude because he was once as defiant as child.

Jesse thinks about the unrest among the blacks in his small town and how he would like to see them burned out. Unfortunately, the blacks do not live in one section of town, but are scattered throughout. This would mean a fire could burn white people's homes as well, which makes the idea unacceptable. As Jesse thinks about this, a song begins to play in his head. The song reminds Jesse of a time when he was eight years old. His father was singing the song as he drove his wife and child home after a picnic. Once they were home, Jesse could hear his father making love to his wife.

Jesse recalls what happened at the picnic that day. A black man who was accused of pushing an old white woman had been found in a nearby town. The whole town went to see this man executed. The man was chained to a tree and tortured, burned, and mutilated before the townspeople descended on him and beat him to death. Eight year old Jesse saw the excitement on his mother's face and the pleasure of his father that day, something that left an impression on the young boy. Even now the memory allows Jesse to achieve an erection and make love to his wife.

Going to Meet the Man Analysis

This story analyzes the causes of prejudice in white people. Jesse is a cop who feels threatened by the rising rebellion of the blacks in his town. The rebellion takes Jesse's sense of personal peace away, making it impossible for him to perform as a man. As Jesse lies in bed thinking about blacks and his personal past, he tells a horrific story of an execution of a black man accused of pushing a woman, though the whole story of what this man did is never explained to the child. However, the child witnesses the horrible mutilation of the black man. Worse, the child witnesses the excitement and pleasure this sight gives his parents, giving him the impression that this sort of thing is not only okay, but desirable. This experience causes a deep sense of prejudice in the child against blacks, a prejudice that will cause a great deal of grief for the blacks this man comes into contact with.



Characters

John appears in The Rockpile and The Outing

John is the eldest child of the Grimes family. In *The Rockpile*, the reader learns that John is not the son of Gabriel Grimes, the patriarch of the family, but a child from a previous relationship Elizabeth Grimes had. It is unclear if John is aware of his illegitimacy, but it is clear that Gabriel is aware of it and it makes him very unhappy. For this reason, John is often the object of his father's anger and abuse.

John is the elder child, therefore in *The Rockpile* he is expected to keep his younger brother, Roy, from playing on a rockpile across the street from their apartment building. Roy, however, has a mind of his own and decides to go over anyway. John allows him to go when he promises to be gone only five minutes. However, John becomes engrossed in a drawing and loses track of time until he becomes aware that Roy has been injured. The injury is minor, but John is punished for not telling his mother that Roy had left.

In *The Outing*, it becomes clear to the reader that John is a homosexual. John is in love with a friend named David. It is not clear if the boys have ever indulged their love, but it is clear that David knows that homosexuality is a sin in the church and if he wants to be saved, he must give it up. As a result, John finds himself pushed out as David turns to a girl who has been saved and is willing to help David find his own salvation.

Roy appears in The Rockpile and The Outing

Roy is the second son in the Grimes family and his father's first born son. Roy is the favored son and often gets away with things that John is unable to, or is actually blamed for. When Roy goes to the rockpile to play with his friends, he does not think about anyone else, especially John. Roy is injured and comes home crying hysterically with a small cut on his forehead. In this story the boys' father does not blame Roy even though it was his choice to go to the rockpile. Instead, the father blames John for not telling his mother that Roy had left or stopping Roy in the first place.

In *The Outing*, Roy is a secondary character who does not play a large role in the plot. However, Roy is one of the boys who is in love with the young woman and who helps pay for the birthday present all three boys, Roy, David, and John, want to give to her. In fact, Roy is with David when they actually give the present to the girl. Once again, Roy is more carefree than his brother, more confident in himself and his relationship with others, providing a contrast to his more humble brother John.



Gabriel Grimes appears in The Rockpile and The Outing

Gabriel is the patriarch of the Grimes family. Gabriel was once a pastor in his own church and is now a deacon in the local church, therefore he believes himself to be saved. Gabriel often forces his religious beliefs on his children, encouraging them to refrain from behavior that might not be moral or holy. Gabriel is an abusive man who often beats his children, especially John. Gabriel is angry with John because he is not his child, but the result of a relationship his wife had before their marriage.

Gabriel loves his children and is especially close to his eldest son, Roy. Gabriel does not try to hide his love for Roy from John, but in fact flaunts it in front of him. Gabriel is hard on his children, often pushing them to make him proud in the church and the community. Gabriel is also hard on his wife, occasionally beating her for perceived infractions.

Eric appears in The Man Child

Eric is eight years old. Eric's father is a farmer and he tells Eric that one day the land will all be his. Eric is happy with this thought, believing it is important to own land. Eric's father has a good friend who is immature and who drinks a lot. This friend loses his land because of poor management and his friend, Eric's father, buys it. This friend is lonely, afraid he will die alone and never have all the things that his friend has. For this reason, one afternoon after Eric has been playing alone, exploring the land that will one day be his, the friend lures him into a shed. The friend then breaks Eric's neck even as Eric is promising him he can have all the land he wants.

Peter appears in Previous Condition

Peter is an out-of-work actor who depends on friends to provide him with a place to live. Peter surrounds himself with white people, enjoying their company and the idea of the freedoms they have. Peter's friend is Jewish, someone he hopes understands where he is coming from when it comes to prejudice. Peter's lover is white, a woman who married a rich man in order to allow her to spend as much time as she likes with her various lovers. Peter believes he fits in this world, but slowly comes to realize he does not. One night, Peter goes to a black bar and sits at the counter. Peter knows that he appears to fit in, but feels as though he does not fit here anymore than he fits in his other world. Peter wants to fit, however, and he begins to converse with a woman at the bar to make himself feel more welcome.

Sonny appears in Sonny's Blues

Sonny is only fifteen when his father dies and not much older when his mother dies. Sonny is left in the care of his brother, but his brother is in the army at the time,



therefore they spend little time together. Eventually Sonny runs away and joins the navy, hoping to escape the drugs that fill the Harlem neighborhood where he lives. Sonny is a jazz pianist and after the navy makes his living in this way. Sonny's brother loses touch with him, only to read about him in the newspaper one day when Sonny is arrested in a drug bust.

Sonny turns to heroin because it is intimidating to put your life into an art form without the support of a mood altering drug. Sonny struggles with his own talent, filled with insecurity despite his wonderful abilities. Sonny has kicked the drug habit, but knows that it could return at any time, even as he returns to his beloved music. This puts Sonny in a situation that both fuels his insecurity and places him around users. However, Sonny has friends who understand his position and help him make the transition into music without the drugs.

Paul appears in This Morning, This Evening, So Soon

Paul is the eight year old son of an American singer/actor living in France. Paul's father is black, his mother is a white woman from Sweden. Paul has never known the prejudice his father has grown up with in the American South, does not even understand that prejudice exists. Paul's world has been Paris, his parents, and the security of his father's fame and wealth. However, as the story opens, Paul is preparing to move to America with his father and mother in order for his father to pursue his career further.

Paul's father worries that his son will experience prejudice for the first time and finds himself afraid to take his son to America. Paul's father once returned to America after living in Paris for four years. This experience was dark and bitter, an experience that left him convinced that he was better off in Europe. Paul's father does not want to raise his child in America and is, therefore, conflicted in this story.

Vidal appears in This Morning, This Evening, So Soon

Vidal is a famous movie director in Paris. Vidal directs the main character of the story in a movie that makes him famous and during which Vidal encourages his actor to draw on his dark experiences growing up in the American South. Vidal understands prejudice and persecution. Vidal once lost a wife and a child to war and is estranged from his only surviving child. Vidal has been persecuted for his political beliefs and now he is alone. Due to his experience, Vidal can relate to Paul's father and encourages him not to forget the past, but to grow from it. This lesson helps Paul's father fear returning to America a little less.

Ruth Bowman appears in Come Out the Wilderness

Ruth is a black woman living in New York City. Ruth is raised in the American South by parents who are deeply religious. When Ruth is once caught in the barn with a boy, her family jumps to the wrong conclusions and force Ruth to beg for forgiveness from God.



This leaves Ruth feeling like she is a dirty person, someone unworthy of love and respect. Soon after, Ruth comes to New York with a man twice her age who teaches her how to earn respect from those around her. Once Ruth discovers some measure of self worth, she leaves this lover and begins searching for someone who can give her the life she feels she deserves.

After time, Ruth falls in love with a white artist named Paul. Paul is a man who does not commit, and who cannot stay with one woman for long. Ruth knows that Paul is about to leave her, that he does not love her. This realization leaves Ruth once again feeling like the dirty child caught in the barn with a boy. However, after a time Ruth comes to realize that it is not her fault that she cannot make Paul love her. Ruth feels as though the white man is filled with guilt and cannot allow themselves to be loved by the women they desire.

Jesse appears in Going to Meet the Man

Jesse is a cop in a small town in the American South. Jesse is deeply bigoted against blacks, especially during this time of unrest in his little town where the blacks are beginning to protest the treatment shown them by whites. Jesse lies in bed the night before a big event at the jail, an event the author never reveals but suggests might be the hanging or punishment of a black protestor, and he cannot sleep. Not only this, but Jesse struggles to be physically able to have sexual relations with his wife. As Jesse lies there, he remembers being eight years old and his father taking him to the gory execution of a black man. Jesse recalls the brutality of the man's death and his father's sexual arousal from the spectacle. After recalling this event, Jesse is finally able to have sex with his wife, suggesting to the reader that a great deal of Jesse's mental health is connected to this horrid act over thirty-five years previous.



Objects/Places

Rockpile appears in The Rockpile

There is a rockpile across the street from the Grimes' apartment building. The boys have been instructed not to play on it because it is dangerous, but Roy decides to go one day out of boredom. Roy is injured, but by a thrown can, not a rock.

Butterfly Brooch appears in The Outing

John, Roy, and David buy a butterfly brooch for Sylvia, a girl who attends the church.

Boat appears in The Outing

On the Fourth of July, the church rents a boat to take the congregation on an outing to Bear Mountain. The pastor holds a church service on the boat that causes David to feel like a sinner because of his feelings for John.

Farm appears in The Man Child

Eric's father owns a farm that includes both lands his father left to him and lands he bought from his friend Jamie when he was having financial problems. Eric is to inherit the entire farm when he grows up.

Room for Rent appears in Previous Condition

Peter stays in a room that his Jewish friend has rented for him. However, when the landlady learns that a black man is staying in the room, she asks him to leave. Peter chooses not to fight her request.

Fork appears in Previous Condition

Ida hits Peter with a fork while they are having dinner and discussing Peter's landlady throwing him out. Peter becomes angry and makes a scene, drawing the attention of the waiter.

Piano appears in Sonny's Blues

Sonny is a jazz pianist. In the final scene of the story, Sonny takes his brother to a club where he plays the piano with a small jazz band.



Newspaper appears in Sonny's Blues

Sonny's brother reads about Sonny's arrest on drug charges in the newspaper.

Le Havre appears in This Morning, This Evening, So Soon

The narrator's ship leaves Europe from Le Havre, beginning the narrator's journey back to America to visit his dying mother. The narrator recalls this trip with bitterness as he worries about a second trip he will be taking back to America, but this time with his wife and child.

Chico appears in This Morning, This Evening, So Soon

Chico is the name of the character the narrator plays in a movie. The movie makes him famous. This character, a young boy filled with anger for his white father and black mother, also helps the narrator get in touch with the anger that stems from his childhood in the American South.

Paul's Paintings appears in Come Out the Wilderness

Ruth Bowman is in love with an artist who paints portraits and other paintings. These paintings fill their small Greenwich Village apartment.

Knife appears in Going to Meet the Man

Jesse recalls seeing one of the executors of a black man wielding a knife in front of the crowd before using it to castrate the condemned man.



Themes

Racial Tensions

The stories in this collection are set in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. During these time periods, racial tension is at its peak in the United States, especially in the South. Blacks are often treated like they are nothing more than animals, spit on in the street and called horrific names just because of the color of their skin. These experiences change these people, making them afraid to walk the streets. The author of these stories takes this setting and makes it part of the conflict in several of his stories. In *Previous Condition*, a black man living in New York is thrown out of his rented room simply because of the color of his skin. This man is emotionally wounded by this experience, an experience that causes him to lash out at the white people who care for him and to turn to strangers who happen to have the same color skin as he does.

In *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon*, a black man from the American South moves to Europe to escape the prejudice he experiences in the small town where he grows up. After only four years, the man goes back to America for his mother's funeral, but finds he has forgotten how to deal with the naked hatred he sees in the eyes of the white men he encounters. This man is filled with rage for the treatment he receives at the hands of these people. Due to his own experiences, this man is afraid to take his child to America where he might face prejudice for the first time in his young life.

In *Going to Meet the Man*, racism affects a white man in a dark and dangerous way. Jesse is only eight when his father and mother take him to the execution of a man who is accused of pushing a white woman down. This man is tortured, lit on fire, and mutilated before the crowd beat him to death. This child sees the excitement in the white people's faces, the beauty and the wonder that this experience brought to his mother's face, and the sexual excitement it offers his father. As a result, this man grows up to be a bigot in an era when the blacks have finally had enough and are fighting back for equal rights.

Racial tension is a reality for black people who live before the civil rights movement changes the laws and makes it more difficult for whites to mistreat blacks. The author chooses to set his stories in this time period and as a result many of his characters, black and white, are motivated by the political atmosphere and racial tension that surrounds them. This is why racial tension is a theme of this collection.

Jealousy and Hatred

Jealousy and hatred are basic human emotions. Everyone has felt them at one time or another. In these stories, the author uses these emotions as motivators for several of his characters. Gabriel Grimes is a religious man who uses a heavy hand with his family. Gabriel loves his wife and children, but having John in his home is a constant



reminder that his wife once lay with another man. Gabriel dislikes John so much that he becomes a target of his anger in both *The Rockpile* and *The Outing*. It is jealousy that makes John's presence such a hard reality for Gabriel and hatred that causes the violence that often erupts between them.

In *The Man Child*, Jamie is a ne'er-do-well, a man who never grows up and accepts his responsibilities. As a result, Jamie has to rely on his childhood friend and his wife to take care of him and rescue him when he gets into trouble. In fact, Jamie once owns a farm next door to his friend, but cannot care for it and has to sell it to his friend. Jamie is once married, but his wife runs away, leaving him alone. Now Jamie watches as his friend's family grows and as they achieve all the happiness he once could have had. Jamie is jealous and because of this, he kills his friend's children and leaves his friend's wife incapable of having any other children.

Come Out the Wilderness is about a woman in love with a white man she knows does not love her. This woman is aware that her lover is about to leave her. This knowledge leaves the woman, Ruth, afraid of being alone and angry with her man for wanting to leave her, an anger that borders on hatred. Ruth is so afraid, she even convinces herself that it would be a good thing if her man went off with another woman. It is this anger, this hatred, that motivates this woman, making hatred a theme of her story.

Family

Several of the stories center around family. In *Sonny's Blues*, a man learns that his brother has been arrested for heroin use. This man was supposed to take care of his brother, to protect him, but somehow he has failed. The man is filled with guilt and resentment because of his brother's choices. In the end, however, he discovers that his brother has found himself without the drugs and that he will survive, giving the brother hope that their family will remain intact.

In *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon*, the narrator is about to move to America in order to take advantage of opportunities in his career. However, this man has a son who has never had to experience the same prejudice he did as a child in the American South. This man is frightened what will happen when his son arrives in America, and wonders if he will understand the prejudice against him. The narrator recalls resenting his father for not standing up to the white people and for not protecting him from bigots. Now the narrator worries that his own son will feel the same way about him.

In *Come Out the Wilderness*, Ruth has run away from her family because they believe her to be unclean, to have had sexual relations outside of marriage. Although this was not true at the time, Ruth felt unclean around her family and had to leave. In this way, her family motivated her to move to New York, a situation that led her to the relationship that now controls her life. For this reason, and the other reasons mentioned above, family is a theme of these stories.

Style

Point of View

There are two distinct points of view in this collection of stories. Several of the stories, including *The Rockpile* and *The Outing*, are told in the third person point of view. This point of view stems from the author's point of view, a point of view that includes comments that can come only from the author. These stories give the author some flexibility, the ability to tell the story through many view points and to keep a certain distance between the reader and the characters in order to offer some surprises in the plot. In *The Man Child* there is also a degree of unreliable narrator, because the child is so young that he does not fully understand what is going on with the adults in his life until the final moments of his own life. Other stories in the collection, such as *Sonny's Blues*, are told in the first person point of view. This point of view offers more intimacy between the reader and the characters and a more detailed understanding of the characters in these stories.

The points of view in this collection all work well within their specific story. *The Rockpile* and *The Outing* offer a varied point of view that allows the reader to see what is going on even when a specific character is not present when the action takes place. This offers the reader a fuller view of the action, not the narrow view that is only available in other points of view. In *Sonny's Blues* and *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon*, the narration is first person and therefore more intimate. This point of view allows the reader to see how the narrator feels about the action in the novel while tagging along as the plot develops. These stories are more introspective than some of the others and the point of view the author utilizes promotes this introspective narration.

Setting

The novels are set in various locations. Many of them are set in New York City, specifically *The Rockpile* and *Come Out the Wilderness*. Some are set in the American South, such as *Going to Meet the Man*. *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon* is set in France where an American man has gone to escape the prejudice of his home in the American South. All these stories are set in a time before or during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, injecting into the stories the tensions that permeated the country during those decades.

The settings of these stories differ from story to story, but what remain the same are the racial tensions that dominated the country, especially the American South, during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. The author uses this tension as a backdrop to the majority of his stories, allowing the tension between the races to become the conflict or the motive for the conflict that propels each story. For this reason, the settings of these stories, though each different, works well within the plots.

Language and Meaning

The author uses a formal language in his stories that is simple, yet educated, creating a literary backdrop to each story that gives them more power, more authenticity. Each story is well crafted, filled with language and grammar that is almost lyrical in some places, while reflecting the uneducated speech of the American black in the decades in which these stories are set. The author uses foreign phrases from time to time in his stories, especially in *This Morning*, *This Evening*, *So Soon*, which is set in Paris. These phrases are not well explained, but their meaning is clear in the context in which they are used.

The language of these stories work well within the stories because they often lend authenticity to the characters by using the slang and uneducated phrases the people represented might have used in the decades in which the novel is set. The language also reflects the high education of the author and the literary care taken in crafting the stories. For these reasons, the language of these stories works well and makes them stories well worth reading.

Structure

This story collection is divided into eight individual short stories. Each story is fairly long, some as long as fifty pages. The stories are set apart by a title page. The stories are told in both exposition and dialogue, including a great deal of inner dialogue in the stories that are presented in the first person point of view.

The structure of these stories is simple, the kind of structure one might see in a modern day novel. The stories include many changes in time and character. The author has set these changes apart with paragraph breaks, making it easier for the reader to understand these changes and follow the plot.

The stories all contain a single, complete plot. The plots vary in degrees of complication, from the simple story of Eric in *The Man Child*, to the more complicated plot of *The Outing*. Each plot has a beginning, a middle and an end and is told in a linear fashion. All the plots come to a satisfactory ending by the end of the stories.



Quotes

"And she found in his face not fury alone, which would not have surprised her; but hatred so deep so as to become insupportable in its lack of personality." *The Rockpile*, pg. 25.

"He affected not to have heard; he put his hands in his pants' pockets and pulled out some change and pretended to count it." *The Outing*, pg. 35.

"He shivered suddenly in the sharp, cold air and buried his face in David's shoulder. David looked down at him and tightened his hold." *The Outing*, pg. 43.

"David put his arm around him. But now where there had been peace there was only panic and where there had been safety, danger, like a flower, opened." *The Outing*, pg. 57.

"He dropped on his face in the straw in the barn, his yellow head useless on his broken neck." *The Man Child*, pg. 80.

"Oh, I know, you're Jewish, you get kicked around, too, but you can walk into a bar and nobody knows you're Jewish and if you go looking for a job you'll get a better job than mine!" *Previous Condition*, pgs. 93-94.

"The moment Sonny and I started into the house I had the feeling that I was simply bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape." *Sonny's Blues*, pg. 113.

"Listen, Creole seemed to be saying, listen. Now these are Sonny's blues." *Sonny's Blues*, pg. 139.

"Paul has never been called any names, so far." *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon*, pg. 149.

"These faces were no longer merely the faces of two white men, who were my enemies. They were the faces of two white people whom I did not understand, and I could no longer plan my moves in accordance with what I knew of their cowardice and their needs and their strategy." *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon*, pg. 164.

The sons of masters were roaming the world, looking for arms to hold them. And the arms that might have held them—could not forgive." *Come Out the Wilderness*, pg. 225.

"He felt that his father had carried him through a mighty test, had revealed to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever." *Going to Meet the Man*, pg. 248.



Topics for Discussion

The Rockpile. Why does John not stop his brother Roy from going to play on the Rockpile? Why does Roy want to play on the rockpile? Why is John blamed even though Roy made the choice to go to the pile? Why does Gabriel look at John with such hatred? What secret causes Gabriel to resent his own son? Why does the mother move out of her husband's way and ask John to pick up the lunch pail? Does the mother know what might happen to John? Does she sacrifice her child to save herself? What does this say about the mother?

The Outing. Why are the Grimeses on a boat? Why does John stand up to Gabriel when Gabriel reminds him to behave? Why does Gabriel remind John to behave when the reader knows the Roy is more likely to act out? What is John's relationship with David? Why does David go to church with the Grimeses? How does David feel about the pressure to be saved? Why does David feel like a sinner during the church service? Why does David begin to think that Sylvia might help him be saved in the church? How does this change David's relationship with John?

The Man Child. Who is Jamie? Who does the title refer to in this story? Why does Eric's father make a big deal out of leaving his son the farm? How does this decision illustrate a contrast between Eric's father and Jamie? Why does Eric's mother suddenly distrust Jamie after the death of her unborn child? What might Jamie have done to the baby? Why does Jamie lure Eric into the barn? Why does Jamie insist that his attack on Eric has nothing to do with the land? What does it have to do with?

Previous Condition. Who is Peter? What does he do for a living? Why is he involved with Ida? What is the nature of their relationship? Why does Peter become angry when Ida hits his hand with a fork? Why does Peter not fight the landlady when she makes him leave his rented room? Why does Peter argue with his Jewish friend over his decision not to fight the landlady's actions? Should Peter have fought the landlady's decision? Why does he choose not to? Why does Peter go to a black bar? What does Peter hope to find there? Does he find this? What is Peter's previous condition?

Sonny's Blues. Why does Sonny's brother feel responsible for Sonny? What promise did he make his mother? For what reason? Why did Sonny join the navy? Why did he not want to remain in Harlem? Why did Sonny return to Harlem? What drug was Sonny arrested for using? What happened to him? Why does Sonny return to his brother's home? How does his brother feel about this? How does his brother feel about Sonny? Why does Sonny return to playing the piano? What does the piano represent to Sonny? Why?

Come Out the Wilderness. Who is Ruth? Why does she think Paul is about to break up with her? Why is Ruth involved with Paul? Does Ruth really love Paul? Why does Ruth resent Mr. Davis's request for a date? Why does Ruth prefer to date white men? What



realization does Ruth come to about white men at the end of the story? What makes Ruth believe this is true? What does this truth mean for Ruth's future?

Going to Meet the Man. Who is Jesse? What does Jesse expect to happen the following day? Why? Why can Jesse not sleep? Why is Jesse excited? What event does Jesse remember from his childhood? Why does Jesse connect this with sexual excitement? How did this event shape Jesse's feelings about black people?