

Notes of a Native Son Study Guide

Notes of a Native Son by James Baldwin

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Summary

The essays that comprise *Notes of a Native Son* range over many genres. Some are essentially memoirs, as in the case of the title essay, “Notes of a Native Son,” in which Baldwin reflects at length on his relationship with his father. In other essays, Baldwin wears the hat of the critic. “Carmen Jones: The Dark is Light Enough” is a film analysis, while “Everybody’s Protest Novel” and “Many Thousands Gone” are examples of literary criticism.

What all the essays share is incisive cultural analysis. Whether he is talking about the unreality of a film that is supposed to portray the African American experience or telling an anecdote about seeing his father on his deathbed, Baldwin is always making a larger point about American society and the American psyche. Baldwin has been compared to the biblical prophets, who stood at a remove from their society in order to rebuke and reform it. Baldwin’s prophetic quality is not to be confused, however, with the social activism of those who stand up for a cause. He insists again and again that the role of the artist is not to champion causes but to express his own experience, which is the only thing he knows intimately enough to speak about with any honesty and insight. And though Baldwin owes something in his style and basic stance to the biblical prophets, his relationship to religion was neither simple nor positive. He saw Christianity, in which he grew up, as a mechanism by which African Americans channeled their desire for revenge against white oppressors, and he suggests in these essays that the Christian story is a legend serving to reinforce the hatreds and presuppositions of the people who told that story, much as the fictional account of a fight in a hotel lobby sets off a violent mob in Harlem, described in the essay “Notes of a Native Son.”

The book is divided into three parts. The first consists of three critical essays: one about the protest novel, generally, and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* specifically; another about Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and the last about the film, *Carmen Jones*. The second part of the book is the most journalistic and anecdotal. It consists of an essay about the Harlem ghetto, another about the trip of a group of African American musicians to Atlanta with the Progressive Party, and the last is the title essay about Baldwin’s relationship with his father. The third part of the book consists of four essays dealing with questions of identity that arose in a new way for Baldwin during his time abroad.

Notes of a Native Son was published in 1955 and therefore uses the term “Negro,” which was standard among both black and white Americans at the time, to refer to African Americans. In this summary the term “Negro” will occasionally be used, as it was the term Baldwin himself used.



Everybody's Protest Novel

Summary

In this essay, Baldwin criticizes protest literature as sentimental, superficial, and stifling of true human freedom. When Baldwin refers to protest literature in this essay, he is talking about fiction or non-fiction works written as protests against racial inequality. He begins the essay with a biting critique of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an anti-slavery novel published in 1852, nine years before the start of the American Civil War. He has three basic criticisms of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: that it is sentimental, that it simplifies instead of expanding our understanding of human beings, and that it is a book motivated by the fear of damnation rather than any deep understanding of the plight of slaves in America.

Baldwin calls *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sentimental and says that sentimentality is "the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel." Stowe, he says, did not shy away from portraying in her novel all the brutal, violent details of slavery, but she did fail to ask "the only important question," which, for Baldwin, is the question of what motivated white Americans to enslave black Americans and treat them so cruelly.

After criticizing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as sentimental, Baldwin calls the novel simplifying and superficial. He describes human beings as indefinable and unpredictable. A novel that accepts simplistic societal categories, like "black" and "white", even if it is protesting against "blacks" being inferior to "whites," cannot be a good novel according to Baldwin.

Next, Baldwin points out Stowe's novel does not really respect the blackness of its black characters. He says apart from a stockpile of cliché black characters, Stowe has only three developed Negro characters in her book. Of these three, only one is similar in appearance and education to the typical American black slave. This is Uncle Tom. (The other two are light-skinned and highly trained and educated.) Uncle Tom, however, is portrayed as being very humble and forbearing. For Baldwin, this shows Stowe's morality was old-fashioned. Black was still bad for Stowe, but she wanted blacks to be redeemed from their fallen state and made more like whites.

Baldwin then moves from criticizing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to talking more generally about protest literature. Protest literature, he says, is supposedly written to bring greater freedom to the oppressed. Baldwin is very much concerned with bringing greater freedom to the oppressed, but he does not think a book written for a good cause is necessarily a good book. A book that is sentimental, superficial, or simplistic is not a well-written book, no matter how important the cause it champions.

Baldwin ends the essay by attempting to show how protest literature is not just bad literature but also stifling of human freedom. Protest literature, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, appears to be on the side of the oppressed, but is really just trying to bring the oppressed up to the social standing of the oppressor. Instead of envisioning a more



humane society, a truly transformed world, writers of protest literature envision a world in which those who are currently oppressed get to have and be everything the current oppressors have and are. According to Baldwin, fighting for freedom within the given societal framework is doomed to tragedy. Instead of battling for our humanity, we need only accept it, Baldwin says. “The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.”

Analysis

Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a book credited with convincing many white Americans that slavery was unjust at the time it was published - shortly before the Civil War. It was, however, criticized at the time and continues to be criticized for being a fundamentally racist and stereotyping book, despite the author’s concern for the plight of black slaves and her involvement in the abolitionist movement. Baldwin adds his voice to these critiques, and in the process makes a larger point about protest literature and the task of the writer. Protest literature, for Baldwin, is not good writing because it is sentimental and simplistic.

Sentimentality and over-earnestness were characteristics Baldwin railed against in much of his writing. For him, sentimentality, or “the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion,” is a way of covering up a lack of true feeling. Sentimentality, says Baldwin, “is the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.” A novel that makes no serious attempt to portray the complexity and paradox of the human situation, and whose central message is only a simple moralizing message, is a superficial novel. Moreover, it is a novel that is inhumane because it makes its readers feel virtuous, giving them the thrill of feeling like they are on the right side of a social cause without actually demanding they reconsider simplistic categories like “black” and “white.” In this way, Baldwin implies, protest literature actually serves the oppressor while it claims to champion the cause of the oppressed.

Vocabulary

sentimentality, ostentatious, spurious, aversion, multitudinous, brutality, pamphleteer, belligerent, deplorable, conundrum, evading, complexity, ambiguity, paradox, mechanization, palatable, forbearance, humility, mortification, virtuous, insuperable, categorization, chaos, limbo, evanescent, ensconced, titillating, salvation, pyrotechnics, vacuities, ciphers, lofty



Many Thousands Gone

Summary

“Many Thousands Gone,” is Baldwin’s characterization of the psychology of the American Negro as well as a penetrating criticism of Richard Wright’s celebrated *Native Son*, a protest novel Baldwin sees as reinforcing, rather than challenging, the American fantasy of the brutal and frightening Negro. The essay also addresses in passing questions of enduring interest to Baldwin: the role of the artist and the importance of faithfully representing complexity rather than reducing it to simplistic tropes.

The essay begins by discussing the uneasiness black Americans create in the minds of white Americans. American blacks, Baldwin says, have been unable to tell their own story and the story that whites have told about them is a gloomy story that eliminates any human component and confines blacks to the social, statistical arena of slums and crime reports. The reason black Americans make white Americans fundamentally uneasy is because they do not fit neatly into the gloomy social story whites have told about them. In other words, because real-life blacks are not just statistics—because they have complex personal and group histories, whites have recoiled from hearing and understanding—they are puzzling to white Americans.

Baldwin analyzes the white man’s myths about the black man in order to arrive at some understanding of the black American experience. The characters of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are two such myths. Aunt Jemima was a stock stereotypical black character in late 19th century minstrel shows. Uncle Tom is the forbearing main black character in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Baldwin says that both Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom contain within their characters the contradictions of the image of the American Negro. Both are subservient and trustworthy. They are meant to be simple depictions of downtrodden yet faithful blacks, and yet there is something unnerving about both characters. It is as if their piety and endurance conceal an “untamable superiority”, and the whites who created these simplistic images of blacks thus feel they cannot get at the complex true identity of black Americans. Their ignorance leads whites to imagine that blacks are murderous beneath the surface.

Here, Baldwin notes the tension or contradiction that exists in whites’ image of blacks is a historical tension. By this he means, however much we think that our society has overcome its dark past of slavery and oppression, that past remains with us; it is embedded in our conscious and unconscious thoughts and associations.

The United States is a country of immigrants, who reject their pasts, but the case of black Americans is unique because they did not reject their past; it was stolen from them. Though blacks have been stripped of their past in one sense, they are branded with it in another sense. They are not allowed to escape the fact they are different and



that, according to whites, their non-Christian, primitive past is shameful. In this way, whites re-cast their own selfish, greed-driven actions in the slave trade as a benevolent missionary act.

Baldwin moves from this general analysis to a critique of so-called problem literature.

Literature written on the topic of racial inequality in the first half of the 20th century was called “problem literature” when written by white authors and “protest literature” when written by black authors. Though there are major differences in the tone of these two pseudo-genres, they share the same basic supposition: being black is a terrible color to be.

The remainder of the essay is a critique of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. *Native Son* was seen as a landmark book because it was thought to look unflinchingly at the sad, dark reality of blacks in America. Wright’s main character, named Bigger Thompson, is battling an unchangeable circumstance—the color of his skin—and it is a battle he ultimately loses by becoming a violent criminal in response to the injustices he experiences.

Before he begins his specific criticisms of the novel, Baldwin takes Wright on as an intellectual and an artist. *Native Son*, he says, cannot be understood without understanding the social climate in which it was written. The late 1920s and the 1930s were a time of bewilderment and idealism. The Great Depression set the scene for American’s naïve acceptance of Marxism in the 1930s. Without rigorously understanding Marx, Americans swallowed his doctrines. This lack of rigor is typically American, Baldwin says. The same circles that adopted a shallow version of socialism came to see the plight of the Worker and the plight of the Negro as one and the same. Baldwin was seen as a spokesman for this view. But an artist who sees himself as a spokesman, Baldwin says, cannot be a good artist, because it is the task of the artist to recreate and examine his own experience, not to represent an entire people.

The reader of Wright’s novel is supposed to confront a monster created by American society and, having confronted this monster, to feel pity and horror at his sad fate. Baldwin says this idea is potentially a good one, but Wright did not execute it well.

The first shortcoming Baldwin points out is that Bigger is the total absence of any social dimension in the novel. Bigger’s relationships with others are apparently non-existent, and this leaves the reader with either no picture of black culture, or a rather bleak one. Thus Wright tacitly endorses the myth created by whites that blacks are totally alienated from whites and from each other.

Finally, Baldwin addresses perhaps the most difficult idea in this essay: blacks do in fact contain within them the violent Negrowhites have invented from their own discomfort. The murderous and raping black man whites fear may originate in the imagination, Baldwin says, but because he is part of the social imagination that blacks themselves participate in, this image has found its way into the Negro psyche. Every American black must fight against an impulse toward violence in order to be fully human. There are two



sides to the American myth of the Negro: there is the subservient and pious Negro and there is the brutal and violent Negro. The real, flesh-and-blood American black person will not find deliverance from the lies told about him in either image. He cannot fight back against oppression by adopting either of these identities. Only by maintaining the tension between the two in himself will he be able to define black identity on his own terms.

Native Son does not maintain this tension. It embraces the image of the violent Negro and then, in a contradictory ending, attempts to redeem him superficially. Wright does this, Baldwin says, because he is trapped both by the American myth of Negro life and superficial American optimism. This makes his novel a contradictory combination of two falsehoods.

Analysis

This essay is the longest in Part 1. The essay is difficult and brilliant because it is essentially dialectical. This means Baldwin shows how to see things that at first seem like contradictions of each other, but are actually two sides of the same coin. The forbearing Aunt Jemima and the violent main character of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, for example, seem like opposites. Aunt Jemima is pious and subservient, while Bigger is a proud murderer and rapist. Aunt Jemima and Bigger, however, are just the two poles of a single myth told by whites about blacks. The psyche of real flesh-and-blood blacks is much more complex than either character, even though it has to contend with this myth told about black Americans.

Another example of complex, dialectical thinking in this essay is Baldwin's explanation of the origin of this myth. Whites told a simplistic story about blacks in subservient, pious characters like Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom. But because whites could not rid themselves of the guilt and shame of their oppression of blacks, they could not understand these characters and the real life blacks who endured and survived brutality without rising up in violence. This lack of understanding made whites uncomfortable, especially because they imagined blacks thoroughly understood and knew whites while remaining mysterious themselves. Out of this discomfort came the American image of the violent and brutal Negro. So from the creation of one image—the subservient Negro—came its opposite—the violent Negro. Baldwin is essentially a dialectical thinker, showing again and again how two things which seem diametrically opposed are actually part of the same thought.

It is this dialectical thinking that allows Baldwin to break out of traps like the one he accuses Wright of falling into: the trap between the American image of Negro life and the American need for "a ray of hope." Wright is not a sufficiently complex thinker, so the protest he makes in *Native Son* is shallow and contradictory. He uses the terms and images he inherits from the white imagination instead of critiquing those terms and images and representing Negro life more honestly.



Aside from a deficiency of dialectical thinking, why does Wright fall into this trap? One could imagine an artist that is not so intellectual as Baldwin still managing to write a penetrating and honest book about the life of American blacks. Wright's central artistic flaw, Baldwin contends, is he made himself the representative of a people and a cause. It is not the task of the artist to represent vast swaths of humanity. It is not his job to champion a cause, even if his convictions inevitably show themselves in his work. A work of art is good in proportion to its honesty, and the only way for an artist to be honest is to portray and examine his own experience. The domain of causes is too general and too ideological to allow for the kind of honesty and humanity Wright demands of art.

The essay is only 22 pages long, but in those 22 pages, Baldwin manages to address many things. His views on the role of the artist convey a partial theory of aesthetics, a topic to which he could have devoted an entire book. The paragraph in which he talks about how history remains in the present whether we remember it or not is a statement on the philosophy of history that, again, he could have written volumes about. He takes on the contradictory myths of the American Negro and indicts Americans for their lack of rigor in adopting a half-baked version of socialism, all in the process of writing a brilliant book review of *Native Son*.

Vocabulary

reverberating, chaos, skirmishes, analogous, dehumanization, tension, alienation, incorrigible, ferociously, limbo, vesture, vengeance, disinterested, alabaster, presuppositions, exorcized, elusive, industrial, primitive, fretful, haste, emancipated, illumination, deliberate, ambitious, ritual, sensibility, compelled, obscurity, impoverished, despised, morbid, anonymity

Carmen Jones: The Dark Is Light Enough

Summary

The third essay of the first section is another scathing critique of a piece of art, this time a movie, which Baldwin sees as dealing inadequately with the question of race. *Carmen Jones* was a 1955 film adaptation of Bizet's opera *Carmen* directed by Otto Preminger.

The root idea of the film is a parallel between the amoral Gypsy woman in Bizet's opera and an amoral Negro woman in a modern setting. This film is in contradiction with itself, however, because throughout the film one gets the sense this root idea is being consciously and awkwardly repudiated. In other words, the filmmakers, in deciding to make a Negro version of *Carmen* are implicitly saying blacks are amoral like Gypsies, but they are not comfortable saying this, so they have to assert in a forced and awkward way that Negroes are not, in fact, amoral. Because blackness and amorality are equated in what Baldwin calls "the national psyche," the film must assert blacks are essentially white in order to assert blacks are not amoral. This denial of color and avoidance of the race issue make the film artificial.

The characters and their surroundings are "spotless," and Negro speech in the film is unrealistic. The sets are tacky and bright and one is left with the sense, Baldwin says, that the filmmakers are trying to convince us that Negroes are as clean and as modern as white people.

Further, Bizet's Gypsy woman is paralleled by a Negro woman, but the violence depicted in Bizet's opera is not paralleled by the kind of violence a Negro woman would face in modern society. The film lacks the imagination and daring to really portray the difficulties of Negro life and, by making all the characters black and completely leaving out white characters, the film completely avoids the issue of racial tension and violence.

But a movie is a series of images and the real message of a movie is in those images, not in the dialogue. The images in *Carmen Jones*, Baldwin says, depict white fantasies about black sexuality.

Baldwin says the black characters encode the anxieties and the fantasies of American culture about blacks. The characters are not representative of actual black Americans. Baldwin says this is the most important thing about the movie: it tells us more about the interior life of Americans than about Negroes. That interior life, he says, is revealed by *Carmen Jones* to be disturbed and monstrous.



Analysis

As with his criticisms of protest literature in general and Richard Wright's *Native Son* specifically, Baldwin's criticism of the film *Carmen Jones* focuses on its unreality and its seemingly unconscious reproduction of cultural stereotypes. *Carmen Jones*, however, has the additional fault of being fundamentally cowardly. *Native Son* was, in Baldwin's view, a good idea gone wrong. Wright may not have been a complex enough thinker to envision a world in which blacks were not fated by circumstance to become monsters, but he did not lack daring. He fully intended to portray what he thought was the hideous reality of Negro life, even if in the end what he actually portrayed was the hideous reality of the white fantasy of Negro life. Preminger, the director of *Carmen Jones*, did not have the same resolve. He was supposedly adapting Bizet's *Carmen* to a black American setting, but, instead, he told a story that had nothing to do with the lives of black Americans despite the all-Negro cast. Baldwin points out the very fact that Preminger excluded whites from the cast altogether actually let him evade the issue of race. In a way, the all-black cast may as well have been an all-white cast, since either way the issue of racial tension would have been avoided.

One weakness in Baldwin's review of *Carmen Jones* is he faults the film for failing to represent the lives of black Americans rather than respecting the director's artistic vision. Did Preminger really intend to give a realistic portrayal of Negro life, or was he telling his own story on his own terms? Here, Baldwin's cogent cultural analysis is at odds with his own philosophy of aesthetics. Again and again in these essays, Baldwin says it is not the task of the artist to represent a people or to make a social statement. It is his job to speak from his own experience, whatever that may be. Preminger was an Austro-Hungarian American, not a Negro, but one can imagine he could say something realistic about his own experience while saying something unrealistic about the Negro experience. This possible complexity never seems to occur to Baldwin, but it is quite possible *Carmen Jones* is honest and original on the level of Preminger's narrative while at the same time failing to break out of the racist and disturbed culture that conditioned Preminger and his cast. The same duality is possible in the case of the protest literature Baldwin criticized earlier in the book.

Vocabulary

protective, inevitable, reverberating, estrangement, chaos, thwart, intertwining, analogous, retaliation, dehumanization, annulment, fruitless, paradox, absolution, incorrigible, segregated, alienation, origins, myths, perpetuate, idiom, forbearing, pious, benevolence, perishing, perpetually, vengeance, unenlightened, unutterable, indivisible, vesture, heathen, missionary, disinterested



The Harlem Ghetto

Summary

“The Harlem Ghetto” is Baldwin’s journalistic account of conditions in Harlem in the 1950s. Baldwin opens with a paragraph about worsening conditions in Harlem; overcrowding is increasing, rents are going up, and wages are going down, Baldwin says.

In spite of this, white visitors to the ghetto fail to perceive how bad things really are because of a strange casual air in Harlem that covers the violence waiting to erupt just beneath the surface.

Baldwin calls the Negro press sensationalist and indiscriminate in its reporting. He says the black press is simply mimicking the white press in both style and content. Baldwin spends a fair amount of time picking apart the shortcomings of particular newspapers, but the main idea here is though the Negro press is inadequate, the founders of the white press had no more foresight and black journalists should not be more harshly judged than their white counterparts.

Baldwin next addresses religion in the ghetto. It is taken as a matter-of-fact that blacks are religious, and their religiosity emerges from the black person’s essential simplicity and good nature. This is far from the truth, he says, because religion is actually just a way Negroes channel their desire for revenge against their white oppressors. Baldwin then moves from religion in general to the relationship between Negroes and Jews.

Black Americans have identified with Jews as portrayed in the Old Testament since the days of slavery, for obvious reasons. In the Old Testament, the Jews were a constantly-suffering people, and Negroes, indoctrinated in Christianity, identified their own suffering with the suffering of biblical Jews. But this identification does not mean blacks like contemporary Jews. The contemporary black American adopts society’s hatred for the Negro as self-hatred and then projects it onto the Jew for two reasons: because the landlord or grocer the Harlem resident is most likely to encounter is a Jew and because Negroes expect better from the long-suffering Jew they know from the Old Testament. Baldwin says the Negro’s contempt for the Jew is really just his contempt for oppressive white society, made smaller and manageable by being projected only onto Jews. Baldwin says the legend of Jewish greed and the legend of Negro inferiority work together to divide Jews and Negroes from each other.

Analysis

Baldwin wrote “The Harlem Ghetto” early in 1948, when he was only 23 years old, but already he had thought about the problems he analyzes in the essay from various angles. In this essay he remarks he used to be a Socialist, and though he had already disowned doctrinaire Socialism at the time he wrote “The Harlem Ghetto,” his analysis is



clearly indebted to socialist thought. His treatment of religion, for example, is classic Marx. Religion may serve as an outlet for the oppressed, but in the process it works against real revolutionary change. For Negroes to gather in the churches of Harlem to yearn for revenge in the words of the Old Testament does nothing to transform the world in which they are treated so brutally that they desire revenge. His treatment of the Negro press, as well, shows his bent toward socialism. The Negro press cannot help but mimic the white press. It imitates the sophisticated tone and superficiality of the white press rather than taking on the real issues of life in the ghetto. Baldwin speaks sharply against this superficiality but he also says the Negro press cannot really be blamed for its shortcomings. It is reproducing the emptiness of American culture and we cannot expect more from the founders of black publications than we did from the similarly vacuous founders of white newspapers like Joseph Patterson or William Randolph Hearst. Here, as in his analysis of Negro-Jewish relations, Baldwin is pointing out all of us are at least partially trapped by our culture. We unthinkingly adopt the biases, the superficialities and small-minded hatred of the culture we grew up in, even when we think we are subverting these things.

It is in his analysis of Jewish-Negro relations that Baldwin is perhaps most influenced by socialist critique of ideology. In the end, Baldwin says, individual Jews and Negroes may develop friendships, but on the societal level, Jews as a group and Negroes as a group will not band together to fight the white Gentile society that oppresses them both. Such an alliance is not possible until American culture itself changes, because the American legend of Jewish greed and that of Negro inferiority work together to keep these two minorities from seeing they are natural allies. This idea—that the reigning ideology, or culture, can divide two groups that should be working together to overturn that ideology—is characteristically Marxian. Baldwin took issue with the dogmatism of socialism; he did not like the way socialists, particularly American socialists, blinded themselves to complexities their theory could not explain, but he remained committed throughout his life to the idea the transformation of Negro life in America required the transformation of American life itself, and, specifically, a transformation of economic structures. Baldwin speaks repeatedly, if indirectly, in these essays about the structures that determine our fates in complex ways. It is clear from his critique of *Native Son* in Part 1 he disagrees with Wright on how these structures determine the fates of Negroes. It is not as simple as saying a brutal environment produces brutalized monsters. Still, if one looks at particular issues—Negro-Jewish relations, for example—it becomes clear racism and anti-Semitism, both of which emerge from the economic, material structure of American society, cause blacks and Jews to work against each other rather than work together.

This essay shows the maturity of Baldwin's early writing. Unlike the majority of his peers in the Negro press and the Negro church, Baldwin's thought operated in a domain beyond mimicry and beyond revenge.

Vocabulary

implacably, casual, liability, embattled, genuine, dignity, incapacitated, indifference, sensationalism, murky, militant, trivial, Olympian, *raison d'être*, audibly, emulate,

inaneities, infantilism, chauvinism, condescendingly, irrational, kinkier, august, exiles,
gauge, structure, bewildered, scapegoat



Journey to Atlanta

Summary

In "Journey to Atlanta," Baldwin gives an account of a trip to Atlanta by a Negro a cappella quintet called the Melodeers, which included two of Baldwin's brothers, one of whom kept a detailed journal of the trip. The Melodeers were recruited by the Progressive Party during Henry A. Wallace's 1948 bid for the United States presidency. Though Wallace made his stance against segregation and racial discrimination a centerpiece of his campaign, Baldwin makes clear in this essay Wallace's claims, like those of most politicians, exist in a realm that has nothing to do with improving the lives of actual people.

Baldwin begins by describing the political disillusionment of black Americans. Though the class of professional, middle-class Negroes, along with "optimistic American liberals" see the indifferent attitude of the Negro as irresponsible, Baldwin says it is an honest attitude. Black politicians, like white politicians, make claims to get votes, and even though there are politicians with good intentions and passionate concern, the position of Negroes, Baldwin says, "has not, in fact, changed so far as most of them are concerned." Baldwin also notes that the black vote is easily bought and sold because black Americans have learned to distrust extravagant political claims and are willing to cast their vote for someone in order to meet short-term goals. Baldwin poignantly notes many of these short-term goals are pathetically small: "bread or a new roof or five dollars, or, continuing up the scale, schools, houses or more Negroes in hitherto Caucasian jobs."

After his discussion of the Negro political attitude, Baldwin moves on to the story of the Melodeers. The quintet was promised a string of concerts in Atlanta churches, where they were meant to draw a crowd with their performance before the speeches and signature-gathering of Progressive Party representatives. The Melodeers, all of whom were under the age of 20, were not politically motivated. They simply wanted to perform for a wider audience while making some money. When they got to Atlanta, however, they were asked to canvass for the party and only after three days were they asked to sing on the party's sound truck. Baldwin recounts all the unfortunate details of the trip: the dorm-style housing, poor food, and hostile behavior of a Mrs. Branson Price, an aristocratic progressive whose conviction in racial equality turns out to have been rather flimsy. The funded portion of the Melodeers trip ended abruptly when Mrs. Price was angered by the group's refusal to keep performing at a party even though the signing conditions were harming their voices. Baldwin ends the essay by observing the political distrust he discussed at the beginning of the essay is fully justified by experiences like that of the Melodeers in Atlanta. The musicians, not particularly bitter toward the Progressive Party, can actually laugh about the experience. Their laughter, Baldwin says, is "according to white men, the peculiar heritage of Negroes, Negroes who were born with the fortunate ability to laugh all their troubles away." This laughter, Baldwin



corrects, is the product not of some innate Negro humor, but of the sad, wise political disillusionment of a people consistently betrayed by the political establishment.

Analysis

On the surface, this essay is Baldwin's retelling of the journal his brother David kept while in Atlanta with the Melodeers. It is clear, however, when Baldwin quotes from his brother's journal, he has added a depth of insight his brother did not provide explicitly in his journal. Baldwin characteristically takes a particular situation—in this case, the unpleasant experience of a group of musicians with the Progressive Party—and sees in it broad forces at play. Thus, the Melodeers' time in Atlanta exemplifies the racism of liberals who do not fully understand the problem of race they so superficially address, as well as the larger issue of the Negro political attitude.

Baldwin shows in this account the good intentions of liberals like Mrs. Price are severely limited, and extend only so far as their self-righteous enlightenment does. That is to say, Mrs. Price, though she was a patroness of a party and a candidate who staunchly opposed racist policies like segregation, was not really someone who could see beyond color. Price and others like her, Baldwin implies, pat themselves on the back for the liberalism which allows them to consort with Negroes, but as soon as any Negro makes some demand of fairness from them, their basic racism was exposed. Price was happy to have the Melodeers in Atlanta, but she expected them to canvass for Henry Wallace even though this was not part of the arrangement, and she became disgruntled with the musicians when they refused to keep singing at a party she hosted because singing in the noisy room was straining their voices. It is possible Price was simply a haughty and demanding woman when dealing with any one, regardless of race, but David's account and Baldwin's analysis see her behavior as symptomatic of a general covert racism among liberals.

The idea with which Baldwin begins and ends the essay is that of the Negro political attitude. Most black Americans are totally disillusioned with the political process. They do not expect leaders, white or black, to actually represent their interests or create real change. The ghetto remains and the miserable conditions in which black Americans live endure, political cycle after political cycle. Only the most naïve Negro, Baldwin tells us, can place any stock in the extravagant promises of politicians. Those who know better shield themselves against inevitable disappointment through distrust. Many whites, and many middle-class, educated blacks see this distrust as an irresponsible apathy on the part of American blacks. Baldwin vindicates this apathy by showing, in fact, disillusionment is the natural and honest reaction to generations of entrenched mistreatment. Here he comments in passing on relations between different classes of Negroes, though he does not stay with the idea for long, since it is not his central point.

Blacks who have worked their way up the social ladder and have attained some kind of professional, middle-class status, are quick to dismiss political apathy as irresponsibility. Though Baldwin does not say this explicitly, he seems to imply these middle-class blacks fail to understand the situation of their own people. Just because it is possible for



some blacks to ascend slightly in the current socioeconomic system does not mean involvement in the political process can make this possible for all blacks. Here, again, Baldwin shows his basically revolutionary outlook. Negroes who involve themselves in the existing political process do so for short-term, minimal improvements in their situation. A long-term and significant change in the lives of black Americans would require structural change. It would require the political domain become something entirely different from the theatrical sham experiences like that of the Melodeers in Atlanta show it to be.

Vocabulary

betrayed, fatalistic, phenomenon, irrespective, paradoxical, gullible, spokesman, canvassing, hoarse, folksy



Notes of a Native Son

Summary

"Notes of a Native Son" is a reflection Baldwin wrote on his relationship with his own father he wrote 12 years after his father's death in 1943. Baldwin's father died on the same day that his last child was born. The day of his funeral was not only Baldwin's 19th birthday, but the day of a violent race riot in Harlem.

Baldwin did not know his father well because his father was not the sort of person to know anyone well. Baldwin describes his father's inability to connect with others, especially his children. Though his father's bitterness had been inexplicable to Baldwin throughout his childhood, by the time his father died, Baldwin had been living on his own for a year and had learned first-hand about the racism that had embittered his father.

His father had nine children whom he could barely feed because of his poverty. He was bitter and suspicious, and he tried to keep his children away from most people, black or white. Baldwin's father told him his white friends were not real friends, and that they would sooner or later turn against him. Baldwin did not understand this bitterness and hatred until after he spent some time in New Jersey where he experienced segregation for the first time and where he contended for the first time with the deep and violent hatred racism evoked in him.

Baldwin went as an 18-year-old to New Jersey to work in defense plants. There he experienced segregation at business establishments for the first time. This experience filled him with fear and anger. The situation reached a boiling point on his last night in New Jersey, when a friend took him to Trenton to see a movie and have some drinks. After seeing the movie, the two went to a diner and requested service, which they were denied. This sent Baldwin into a surreal and frenzied attack of anger. He left the diner and felt as though the crowded streets were filled with white people moving toward and against him. He walked manically to a fashionable segregated restaurant and sat at a vacant seat until a waitress approached him to tell him he would not be served. Filled with rage, he grabbed a water mug on the table and threw it at her. She ducked and it shattered a mirror behind the bar. At this point, Baldwin snapped out of his manic state and realized he was in grave danger. His friend, waiting for him outside, told him to run while he misdirected Baldwin's pursuers and the police. Reflecting on this incident afterward, Baldwin realized the real threat to his life was not the external possibility of being murdered but the internal possibility of being consumed by hatred.

The second part of this essay returns to Harlem at the time of his father's death, and again Baldwin shifts back and forth between descriptions of social unrest, analyses of his father's character, and insights into the questions both of these things provoked in him. Baldwin goes to visit his father in the hospital, making the trip with his father's older sister. He remarks that, upon seeing his father, he realized why he had so strongly



avoided the visit. It was not because he hated his father, as he thought, but because he had hated him and wanted to hold onto an image of his father as a man strong enough to be hated, not as a man that could not be hated only because he was depleted, mentally absent, and dying. When the news of his father's death reaches his home by telegram the next morning, Baldwin leaves his mother and siblings to be cared for by neighbors and friends who rush to comfort them.

The third and final part of the essay deals mostly with Baldwin's father's funeral. The day of his father's funeral was Baldwin's 19th birthday and he spent most of the day drinking with a friend. At the funeral, his father was eulogized as a thoughtful, patient, and forbearing Christian. Baldwin says this is a complete misrepresentation of the embittered and angry man they all knew. Nonetheless, he concludes, given the burden a poor black man with nine children had to bear, such a eulogy was somehow just. His father may have been cruel and distant, but he also had to contend with raising children in a world he knew hated them, and the hatred he felt in turn for this world had consumed and troubled him in ways unknown to anyone but him.

After his description of the funeral, Baldwin describes a riot that happened the same day. After the funeral Baldwin goes out to celebrate his birthday. The same night, a fight breaks out in a hotel between a Negro soldier and a white policeman over a Negro girl. The soldier was shot and, immediately, a fictional version of the event hit the streets outside the hotel. The soldier is said to have been shot in the back and to have died protecting a Negro woman, neither of which was true. The story of the hotel lobby fight spreads throughout Harlem and a mob breaks out and violently attacks white businesses in Harlem. The spoil and looting is more about violence than theft; windows are smashed but goods are only partially looted. Baldwin is struck by the waste of the outburst as he sees sheets, blankets, clothing and food scattered in the streets. Harlem, Baldwin says, needed something to smash. Violence was precisely the point. Most of the time, violence is directed inward in Harlem. This is why there is so much criminality in the ghetto. Occasionally however, the anger of the ghetto's citizens is directed outward: in this case, at whites who own businesses in Harlem but do not live there.

The reason the violence is not always perpetrated in a simple, uncomplicated way against whites, Baldwin explains, is the relationship between white and black Americans is anything but simple and uncomplicated. Whites and blacks are caught up together in their mutual antagonism, even if it is the whites who have power on their side. Whites and blacks hate each other on one level, but they are also too much a part of each other's psyches not to also love each other in a twisted way. For this reason, blacks divert their violence into self-destruction. And here Baldwin ends his essay with a reflection on hatred, which he says has never failed to destroy the hater. But in order to avoid hate, one has to hold in one's mind two contradictory ideas. The first is a total acceptance of life as it is and men as they are, without a tinge of hatred. The second is a conviction that injustice is unacceptable. Baldwin wonders how it is possible to renounce hatred and accept the world for what it is without giving in to complacency. Having realized this tension is inescapable, Baldwin is weighed down and wishes he could search the face of his ever-distant and now deceased father, who held in his own heart this irresolvable tension.



Analysis

Baldwin starts this essay by stating in strikingly direct fashion his father died on the day of his last child's birth. This fact is jarring and interesting simply as a fact, but it is also a metaphor for the dialectic between death and life that structures the essay, and, arguably, Baldwin's thought as a whole. We have already encountered Baldwin's insistence on the reality of hatred in every black American's heart as well as the need to transcend this hatred. The dialectic between life and death he discusses and elaborates in "Notes of a Native Son" is a variant of this dialectic between hatred and love that so obsesses Baldwin. Baldwin in this essay shows how these two sets of tensions intersect with each other in the story of his relationship with his father. Baldwin's father sought a way out of hatred.

He was incensed by the situation of black Americans, but though he asserted he was proud of his blackness, the color of his skin had cost him too dearly to be so easily embraced and loved; he was plagued by the self-destructive tendencies Baldwin explains in the last essay of the book as the inescapable result of the complex relationship between black and white people in America. In sort, Baldwin's father was a bitter man and this bitterness made Baldwin's dealings with him distant and cold. It is only years after his death that Baldwin can reflect on his father's struggles and see his own struggles in them. This moment of recognition occurs gradually in this essay, but the warmth this recognition elicits in Baldwin is sudden, and comes only at the end, when he says he wishes his father were alive so he could search his face for the answer to the question of how one can love people and the world just as they are while hating injustice.

Vocabulary

apocalypse, anarchy, discontent, contemptuous, forbade, establish, intravenously, vindictively, cunningly, hostility, enmity, ingenious, subsequently, imprecations, contrived, consciously, anticipate, accustomed, abruptly, womb, clergymen, bereavement, eulogized, inevitable, technique, equivocated, unprecedented, incongruous, chronic, cronies, gangrene, rancor, despair



Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown

Summary

This essay is about the experience of black Americans in Paris, focusing on their encounters with black Americans, white Americans and Africans. Baldwin's take on these three different types of relationship can be easily summarized. Black Americans tend to avoid other expatriate black Americans because one of the aspects of American culture they are trying to escape is the idea that black people are only happy when they are grouped together. White Americans are made uneasy by the presence of black Americans so far from home, and when the two groups do consort in Paris, they tend to avoid any discussion of home, with all its attendant racial tension. Instead, they speak superficially as tourists of matters French. Finally, the encounter between American blacks and African blacks, throws into relief the peculiar relationship between white and black Americans.

The Africans living Paris at the time of Baldwin's writing were colonized peoples with an unambiguous relationship to their own countries. They were people who saw themselves forced to eke out a living in the land of their colonial rulers, but they had a clear sense of where they came from and strong ideas about their nation's need for independence. American blacks, on the other hand, are a people dispossessed of their own African heritage and the 300-year gulf between American blacks and Africans is a gulf too deep to be bridged merely by skin color. Baldwin says the alienation of the American Negro from his own history, while it is a product of his savage treatment at the hands of white oppressors, is something he shares with white Americans. That is to say, Baldwin sees alienation from the past as a hallmark of American culture. The journey from alienation to true identity, Baldwin says, is a journey blacks and whites must make together.

Analysis

Baldwin wrote this brief essay in 1950. The next essay, "A Question of Identity," treats some of the same themes in more detail. While the essay is in structure a taxonomy of the kinds of relationships formed by black Americans living in Paris, its central idea is more pointed. The essay is really about the unsettling realization that black Americans and white Americans are linked by a complex brew of love, hate, and a history neither has been able to appropriate meaningfully. The bond between these two groups is only clear and striking when they are transplanted from home. Only in a foreign setting do the two realize that, in fact, they have more in common with each other than they do with foreigners who have the same skin color.



Baldwin, in this essay and elsewhere, takes on the role of an expatriate American critic of American culture, not unlike Henry James, whom he admired and read avidly. Baldwin's relationship to American culture is ambivalent. He does not aim for the cool detachment of certain intellectual exiles who see themselves as above or beyond the smallness of American culture; on the contrary, American culture is an obsession and a preoccupation for Baldwin. His distance from home only throws into relief the complexities of the American experience. In the next essay, it will become clear that Baldwin's enduring interest in American culture was something he saw as a mark of integrity. To refuse to face one's own culture, no matter how distasteful that culture may be, and to replace it with a foreign culture which one can never hope to fully understand and experience, is a superficial act. Americans may have no sense of history, they may be unsophisticated and alienated and small-minded, but their culture and their psyches are every bit as complex and every bit as worthy of exploration as that of other people's. Moreover, without plumbing the depths of the American experience, Americans will never truly have an identity. It is understandable the black American should be discomfited by the white American in Paris, or the black American in Paris, or the African in Paris, but only by interrogating this uneasiness can he hope to overcome the alienation that was forced upon him by the bitter history of slavery and American racism.

Vocabulary

frivolously, tantalizing, axiom, isolation, kinfolk, bigotry, distorting, martyr, tentatively, vibrant, intolerable, constricts, anecdotes, ambivalence, conspicuous, sojourn, hybrid, articulate



A Question of Identity

Summary

“A Question of Identity” is an exploration of the many ways that Americans in the American student colony in Paris relate to European culture and what their stance reveals about their attitude toward their own culture. Baldwin begins by explaining though most of the people in the student colony are former soldiers studying under the GI bill, the common denominator of military experience does not explain their presence in Paris. For one thing, having been in uniform is not the same as having had a common military experience; many former GIs never saw combat and each person’s experience is unique. Moreover, the majority of ex-GIs are not in Paris but back home in the United States. Baldwin thus dismisses the idea that all these students stayed in Paris as a reaction to some shared shock undergone during the war in Europe.

The many reasons for soldiers to stay behind in Paris are not obvious. Most of them are studying topics they could just as easily study back at home in greater comfort. Most of them have only the most superficial acquaintance with French culture and history and no knowledge of the French language. Those who have any sympathy for French culture are only infatuated with the legend of Paris, Baldwin says. Coming into contact with the real thing when it is the legend they were seeking comes as rather a shock to many of these students. The French, Baldwin says, do not live in this imaginary Paris of legend. They live in the real Paris and they keep the romanticizing tourist at arm’s length. For this reason, even the rare tourist who takes a genuine interest in the French learns very little about them. This is particularly true for American tourists, who are in the uncomfortable position of being distasteful to the French for their naiveté and powerful as a result of Europe’s postwar economic situation. The American in Paris wants to be liked but the Parisian cannot see him as an individual divorced from the culture and actions of his country. The American who seeks the Paris of legend and faces the real Paris eventually becomes disillusioned and goes home. His newfound respect for his own country, however, is as superficial as his infatuation with France was, says Baldwin. This tourist claims a new maturity when he overcomes his desire for the sophistication and romance of Paris, but he is actually just embracing a fictional America in place of a fictional France.

The next kind of American expatriate Baldwin analyzes is the student who has actually managed to immerse himself in French culture. He speaks French, he is reading both famous and obscure French writers, he visits museums, adopts French tastes and preferences, lives with a French family and is friends only with French people. While this kind of student appears to have adapted admirably to a new culture, Baldwin says his relationship to this culture is still superficial. His conversations with the French are limited to witticisms and remarks about French wine and culture. He does not have real conversations because he has no real identity. He has nothing to offer because he does not have a deep understanding of his own culture and history. Just as much as the first kind of American student, the Francophile is avoiding reality.



Between these two extremes, Baldwin says, are a number of different ways of relating to French culture. What unites them all is they are all in some way or another confronted with the question of identity. What sets them apart from each other is the way they answer or avoid that question. It is not all confusion in the American student colony, Baldwin says. Hidden among the bewildered and fantasizing are those who recognize the question of identity for what it is and use their distance from the American continent to seek answers to that question which was hard to recognize as a central question at home.

Analysis

“A Question of Identity” is unique among this collection of essays because it does not deal with the question of racism. Instead, it is about the various attitudes an American in Paris can have toward French culture and what these attitudes reveal about his relationship to his own culture. Despite the fact the essay does not deal with race, it is really in keeping with the themes Baldwin explores when he analyzes American racism. These issues are, broadly speaking: group identity, cultural alienation, and the various conscious and unconscious strategies Americans have developed to avoid dealing with these issues.

It is clear from this essay Baldwin’s experience as an outsider in the United States made him a particularly incisive analyst of the expatriate community in France. Having always seen his own society from the outside as an alienated minority, Baldwin understands the varieties of responses to the experience of alienation. Thus, he can look at the American student colony in Paris and see more than a group of people traumatized by war or infatuated with French culture. In the student who knows next to nothing about France and leaves in disillusionment as soon as the real France is revealed to him, as much as in the student who immerses himself totally in French culture, Baldwin sees the superficiality of those who refuse to grapple with the questions of identity their own society poses to them.

Who better to make this critique than an African American, for whom the question of identity is an ever-present reality, whether he knows it or not? As Baldwin alludes to throughout these essays, the African American is a consummate actor. He must forever be attuned to the expectations and preferences—in fact, the worldview—of white Americans, whose culture is fundamentally antagonistic to his people; the African American must then manipulate his own behavior to meet or surprise these expectations in ways that will allow him to thrive in a hostile culture. It is important to note, however much Baldwin ascribes his own acuity to his blackness, he is obviously singular even among African Americans. Though his position in American society as an African American may have been a precondition for his perceptiveness and depth of psychological insight, it is not a sufficient condition for either.



Vocabulary

speculation, apparent, coherent, wretched, shrines, treacherous, romantic, bureaucracy, proceeding, dilemma, definitively, diverse, conundrum, ceases, crudities, cacophony, affirmative, incomparably, adaptation, artificiality, haze, safeguarding, disproportionately, bohemian



Equal in Paris

Summary

In this essay, Baldwin tells the story of his arrest in Paris for being in possession of a stolen bed sheet he had borrowed from a visiting friend. The friend is initially staying at a different hotel, but when he becomes frustrated with the service there, he comes over to Baldwin's hotel. Baldwin borrows the stolen sheet without much thought and, later, when police are sent to investigate the theft, Baldwin and his guest are arrested. They are sent to a series of prisons, are eventually separated, and are told next to nothing about their ultimate fate. Baldwin spends a total of eight days in prison, and is only released when a lawyer he used to work for intervenes on his behalf after a released prisoner contacts him for Baldwin. Baldwin describes with great psychological acuity the details of his time in prison, from the hardened face of the photographer tasked with taking his mug shot, to the dignity of the North African prisoners who, unlike the disillusioned around them, still had the grace to be bewildered by finding themselves entangled in the French bureaucratic machine for some real or imagined petty offense.

Analysis

This essay is an account of Baldwin's harrowing experience as a man arrested for the most petty of offenses in a country whose culture he does not understand and whose people misunderstand him. His reflections on that foreign experience arrive, in the end, at a conclusion about something not at all foreign because it's universal: human suffering. Baldwin tells us that human suffering, though it is the most palpably real thing in many people's lives, is unreal for those who are not wretched and who manage to avoid really looking wretchedness in the face. Thus, after eight horrible days in prison, Baldwin tells the court the story of his friend's bed sheet larceny and his own subsequent arrest and the response of the court is laughter. The absurdity of the situation and the fact that, in the end, Baldwin was not forever trapped in the bureaucratic machine, made the whole affair terribly amusing to the courtroom officials. Baldwin's friend, also released from prison, managed to join in this amusement and proclaimed the French "great", but Baldwin was too much affected by his own fear in prison and by the fear and pain he witnessed there to laugh at the situation. He finds the laughter of those for whom suffering is unreal, deeply chilling, and he ends the essay by saying his own life began during that year in Paris when he realized the universality of this cruel laughter.

A theme that occurs throughout these essays is treated most fully in "Equal in Paris." This is the theme of the black American's ability to perform to the expectations and desires, conscious or not, of the people around him. Baldwin talks about his ability to anticipate the reactions of white Americans and to manipulate his own personality and behavior to his advantage. These skills, that he says most black Americans are trained in for the purpose of survival, are Baldwin's "weapons" at home. In France, these



weapons are ineffective because he does not understand the French well enough to act in accord with their biases and preferences. Baldwin laments the fact that these weapons are not at his disposal, but at the same time he says these weapons were ultimately doing him more harm than good. Whatever violence he was averting with these psychological weapons could not compare to the intensity of the violence he was perpetrating against himself by making himself totally malleable and emptying himself of his own personhood. Baldwin will take up this issue again in another key in the next essay, “Stranger in the Village.” In that essay he makes the point that black Americans are constantly and acutely aware of white culture even while white people are ignorant of or indifferent to black Americans. The reader will remember that, in the first essay of the collection, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin seems to see this imbalance as a sort of power black Americans have. While white culture understands only the legends they have created about the long-suffering and patient Negro in Uncle Tom or Aunt Jemima, black Americans are intimately familiar with white culture. In that first essay, Baldwin explains how this dialectic of knowledge and ignorance leads eventually to the white myth of the violent Negro. In “Equal in Paris” and in “Stranger in the Village” Baldwin moves beyond a simple explanation of the generation of legends to an exploration of the effect of this imbalance of knowledge on black Americans in general and on him specifically. It is a painful reality for Baldwin that he knows more about the dominant culture than its inheritors—white people—will ever care to know about him.

Vocabulary

chambermaids, remote, nymphomaniac, inflexible, ironically, scarlet, reprimand, cuckold, manipulating, crucial, counterparts, humility, interrogation, incommunicado, embassy, sequence, characteristics, camembert, demoralized, liberating, universal, gesture



Stranger in the Village

Summary

“Stranger in the Village” is about Baldwin’s time in a tiny Swiss village whose residents were fascinated by his blackness because they had never seen a black man before. The village is four hours from Milan and three hours from Lausanne, but because it is in the mountains, it is extremely isolated. Only 600 people live in the village, and its only attraction is hot spring water. Baldwin spends two weeks there one summer and returns that winter to work in a place with no distractions. All the villagers thus know his name, but they are so fascinated by the color of his skin that they do not see him as a real person. The children run after him shouting “Neger!” and though their cries are totally innocent and they are simply calling out the color of his skin, the word inevitably reminds Baldwin of the American racial slur, and the difference in meaning between two words that sound so similar prompt his reflections on the nature of history and cultural experience that are the themes of this essay.

Analysis

This essay, if read superficially, is shocking. Baldwin seems at various points to be valorizing the cruel history of the black slave’s dispossession in America. Like his statements about the inevitable violent impulses of the black man, the statements about history and culture in this essay require close reading to be understood as something more than blithely offensive comments about the history of black Americans.

As touched upon in the previous essay analysis, Baldwin is exploring the psychological ramifications of the fact that black Americans are totally disconnected from their own history and have been only awkwardly assimilated to a European tradition that is not their own. Even the isolated and ignorant villagers Baldwin meets in Switzerland are more closely tied to Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt and Racine than Baldwin is. They may have seen less of the world, less even of Europe, than Baldwin has, but because they are tied historically to the greatness of European culture, this greatness is theirs.

Baldwin’s experience as a total stranger in a place that has never seen somebody like him prompts him to imagine the situation reversed. What was it like when white men arrived unexpectedly in the African village of Baldwin’s ancestors? The reversal, Baldwin notes, is not symmetrical. When white men came to an African village, they came as conquerors, not as visitors, and this makes all the difference.

Much of the essay is devoted to the idea that the relationship between white and black people in America is singularly complex. A black man may arrive in a Swiss village and amaze the villagers with the color of his skin. This event raises many issues: the imbalance of understanding between white European and black American, the sadness



of the alienated black man who cannot claim as his own a legacy which even an isolated and ignorant Swiss villager is in possession of, and the desire of the black American to be seen as a human, not a novelty. But whatever issues raised by his presence in the village, they are not as complex and as subtle as the issues raised by his long exile and gradual acceptance in the American society that ripped him from his own history.

The story of blacks in America, Baldwin says, is a tragic story but it is also the story of the European idea of white supremacy being transformed in agonizing, violent ways into something uniquely American. Baldwin says the idea of white supremacy, that he asserts is embedded in the European psyche, is an idea that remained comfortably abstract in the Old World. Only in America was the black man an inescapable part of a white society. The easy abstraction of the European is thus upset by the insistent presence of the black man's humanity in American society. The white American's attempt to maintain the idea of white supremacy in the face of the black American's humanity leads him, Baldwin says, into ever more venomous and fantastic attitudes. This is what distinguishes the relationship between American blacks and American whites from the relationship between possessor and possessed. The slave-master relationship is a universal, but according to Baldwin, the relationship between American black and American white is uniquely terrible, subtle and meaningful. And here Baldwin makes a point that is, at first blush, shocking. He says the history of the American Negro problem is not just shameful, but is also an achievement. The history of Americans' brutality against blacks, Baldwin seems to be saying, can be seen in a positive light. In order to understand this, one has to understand the philosophy of history that Baldwin is taking for granted in this essay. And in order to understand that philosophy of history, we have to return to socialism and dialectical materialism.

The idea that a historical moment can be at once disgraceful and the beginning of a leap forward for humanity is stated most famously by the German idealist philosopher Georg Hegel, but a version of this idea that focuses more on material and economic conditions than on abstract states of the human psyche was developed by Marx and Lenin. Baldwin does not reveal the subtleties of his own view of history in this essay, but it is clear he shares a dialectical understanding of history with Hegel, Marx and Lenin. This is how he can see something as disturbing as slavery in America as an achievement. Slavery in America, Baldwin says, led to a new intimacy between slave and master. Unlike the colonial slaves of Europe, American slaves had to be integrated into the masters' society. They could not be kept at a safe distance. This intimacy led to a complex back-and-forth between the lie of white supremacy and the reality of the black man's humanity. This complex back-and-forth, or dialectic, is the matrix from which a new voice will emerge. When the black American finds his identity and claims his voice, humanity itself will have advanced because something real will have been wrought from the master-slave relationship and it will have been transcended, not just avoided as it was in Europe.

Vocabulary

inaccessibility, sanctity, astonishment, miraculous, figurine, solicitude, marveling, domination, residuum, instantaneous, smirk, abyss, dreadful, bluntness, bore, captive, sincerely, radical, validity, sustenance, virtue, myth, perpetual



Important People

Harriet Beecher Stowe

Stowe was the author of the 19th century abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which Baldwin criticizes as an example of the superficial genre of "protest literature." The black characters in Stowe's novel, Baldwin says, are stereotypes and legends.

Richard Wright

Richard Wright was the author of the novel *Native Son*, which tells the story of Bigger Thomas, an African American who becomes a criminal monster because of the hostility and brutality he experiences. Bigger is supposed to represent every African American. Baldwin criticizes Wright for his fatalism and his inability to transcend the white legend of the American black man.

David Baldwin

David Baldwin is James Baldwin's father. He is a preacher and an embittered man. The essay "Notes of a Native Son" is a reflection on Baldwin's relationship with his father. He is described as a cold and distant man unable to establish relationships with anyone, including his own family members. Nonetheless, by the end of the essay Baldwin has realized that his father cannot be faulted for his bitterness since he had to struggle with racism and poverty his whole life.

The Melodeers

This African American quintet's trip to Atlanta is the subject of the essay "Journey to Atlanta." The quintet is from Harlem and includes two of Baldwin's brothers, one of whom keeps a journal of their trip which Baldwin uses as the basis for the essay. The quintet goes to Atlanta as part of Henry Wallace's bid for the United States presidency. They are told that they will perform at churches in exchange for pay and private accommodations, but when they arrive they are asked to canvass, are housed dormitory-style, and are not given any legitimate performance engagements.



Objects/Places

Harlem

The essay “The Harlem Ghetto” is a journalistic account of the psychological climate in Harlem. Baldwin describes the Negro press and the relationship between African Americans and Jews in order to describe the ghetto environment. Harlem is taken as the epicenter of all northern African American culture. Rarely does Baldwin speak in any detail about African American communities outside of Harlem. Harlem is basically the background in all of these essays and it is featured prominently in “Notes of a Native Son,” when Baldwin describes a mob outburst in Harlem on the night before his father’s funeral.

Paris

Baldwin moved to France when he was only 24, in 1948. Though he returned to the United States repeatedly, he spent much of his adult life in Paris. Three of the essays in the third section of the book deal with questions of identity raised when African Americans and white Americans go to Paris. Baldwin distinguishes between the Paris of legend and the real Paris. The former is romantic while the latter has all the problems of any real place.

Village in Switzerland

The final essay of the book deals with Baldwin’s experience in a tiny Swiss village not far from Milan and Lausanne. Baldwin is the first black man the villagers have seen, The town has only 600 residents and is a tourist attraction because of its hot springs.



Themes

Role of the Artist

Aesthetic concerns unify the essays of the first part of the book. Baldwin asserts repeatedly the role of the artist is not to champion a social cause or represent an entire group, but rather to describe his own experience. This does not mean all artists are supposed to write memoirs, but all true works of art must emerge from an artist's honest look at his own experience. Baldwin criticizes Harriet Beecher Stowe, Richard Wright, and Otto Preminger for failing to do this. Uncle Tom's Cabin, Native Son, and the film Carmen Jones are not great works of art because they do not emerge from the singularity of personal experience. In attempting to capture something outside of their experience, these three artists remain trapped in the superficialities and lies of American culture. Baldwin, like another famous essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, is saying that only individuality can produce originality. Those who try to speak for a people or a cause can only end by unconsciously parroting what is in the air.

Vengeful Hatred

In the essay "Many Thousands Gone," Baldwin makes the claim that all black men must resist the urge to become violent monsters. This is the clearest and most striking statement of the theme of vengeful hatred in Notes of a Native Son. Baldwin analyzes the resentment of African Americans toward white Americans from many angles. In "Many Thousands Gone," he criticizes Wright for creating a character who expresses only one side of the love-hate tension that exists in African Americans. Baldwin says the black American must retain the tension between violent hatred and its opposite in order to retain his humanity. To become the violent black man of white legend is not to exact revenge on white culture but simply to succumb to it. In "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin describes his father as a man embittered by the constant struggle against hatred. In "Stranger in the Village," Baldwin gives a historical treatment of the African American's hatred for his white oppressors. He concludes this mutual hatred is actually a strange and singular combination of love and hate, and that the relationship between black and white in America is unlike any other relationship between black and white people in the world. While other black-white relations are limited to the relatively simple relationship of the colonizer and the colonized, relations between blacks and whites in America are subtle and complex because black people cannot be held at arm's length in the United States. The dialectic between love and hate is the overarching theme of the book.

Identity

The theme of identity dominates the final section of the book, but, like all of Baldwin's themes, can be found in all of the essays in this book if you look closely enough. (The



ubiquity of Baldwin's themes is attributable to the fact that his thought is so penetrating and complex, as well as to Baldwin's structural and analytic cast of mind. This will be dealt with in further detail in the section on style.) The African American has had his past stolen from him by his enslavers. He has therefore been dispossessed of the usual route to group and individual identity. Baldwin has a keen sense of the gap between the impoverished vision of African American culture espoused by dominant white culture and the reality of African American culture, which is decidedly richer than white people are prepared to recognize. Still, he believes that African Americans are essentially in exile.

Unlike other oppressed black people, like the North Africans colonized by Europeans, the African American does not have a fight for independence to wage. All ties to his home have been severed; he does not even know where he came from or who his ancestors were. The attempt to craft a new identity in the United States has been ongoing, but because the forces of violence and hatred have cramped that attempt, the African American psyche has been done a violence no less grave than the violence perpetrated against the African American body. This violence is reflected in the self-destructive behaviors Baldwin sees in himself in those around him, like the habit of adapting one's personality and behavior constantly to the expectations and preferences of the white people who have a certain control over the fate of the African American in so many day- to-day situations. Baldwin sees Richard Wright's character Bigger Thompson as an example of the penetration into the Negro consciousness of the white legend of the violent Negro. This incursion of violence into the minds of African Americans is tragic, but it is also the path to an unprecedented and hybrid identity for both African Americans and white Americans. Only by facing honestly the questions of identity implicit in the reality of racial tension, rather than running from them by attempting to assimilate into a foreign culture or by embracing a superficial version of American culture, can Americans hope to fashion a genuine identity.

Styles

Structure

The book is structured in three parts. The first is mostly literary/film criticism, the second is personal and anecdotal, and the third deals with the expatriate experience. These divisions are a useful structuring device, but because the book's major themes occur in every essay and because Baldwin's thought is essentially of one piece, this structuring device is simply a way of giving the book form.

Perspective

Tone

Quotes

Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.

Let us say then, that truth, as used here, is meant to imply a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, then, is activated by what might be called a theological terror, the terror of damnation; and the spirit that breathes in this book, hot, self-righteous, fearful, is not different from that spirit of medieval times which sought to exorcize evil by burning witches; and is not different from that terror which activates a lynch mob.

The 'protest' novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary.

Finally, the aim of the protest novel becomes something very closely resembling the zeal of those alabaster missionaries to Africa to cover the nakedness of the natives, to hurry them into the pallid arms of Jesus and thence into slavery. The aim has now become to reduce all Americans to the compulsive, bloodless dimensions of a guy named Joe.

It is the peculiar triumph of society—and its loss—that it is able to convince those people to whom it has given inferior status of the reality of this decree.

The 'nigger,' black, benighted, brutal, consumed with hatred as we are consumed with guilt, cannot be thus blotted out. He stands at our shoulders when we give our maid her wages, it is his hand which we fear we are taking when struggling to communicate with the current 'intelligent' Negro, his stench, as it were, which fills our mouths with salt as the monument is unveiled in honor of the latest Negro leader. Each generation has shouted behind him 'Nigger!' as he walked our streets; it is he whom we would rather our sisters did not marry; he is banished into the vast and wailing outer darkness whenever we speak of the 'purity' of our women, of the 'sanctity' of our homes, of 'American' ideals. What is more, he knows it. He is indeed the 'native son': he is the 'nigger.' Let us refrain from inquiring at the moment whether or not he actually exists; for we believe that he exists.

The privacy or obscurity of Negro life makes that life capable, in our imaginations, of producing anything at all; and thus the idea of Bigger's monstrosity can be presented without fear of contradiction, since no American has the knowledge or authority to contest it and no Negro has the voice.



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

The creation of such ciphers proves, however, that Americans are far from empty; they are, on the contrary, very deeply disturbed.

It is the terrible dilemma of the Negro press that, having no other model, it models itself on the white press, attempting to emulate the same effortless, sophisticated tone—a tone its subject matter renders utterly unconvincing. It is simply impossible not to sing the blues, audibly or not, when the lives lived by Negroes are so inescapably harsh and stunted.

The Melodeers laugh about their trip now, that good-natured, hearty laughter which is, according to white men, the peculiar heritage of Negroes, Negroes who were born with the fortunate ability to laugh all their troubles away.

I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.

Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law.

This is the difference, simply, between what one desires and what the reality insists on—which difference we will not pursue except to observe that, since the reasons which brought the student here are so romantic, and incoherent, he has come, in effect, to a city which exists only in his mind.

I was chilled by their merriment, even though it was meant to warm me. It could only remind me of the laughter I had often heard at home, laughter which I had sometimes deliberately elicited. This laughter is the laughter of those who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of the living is not real.

The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me, as indeed would New York's Empire State Building, should anyone here ever see it.



Topics for Discussion

Topic for Discussion 1

What does Baldwin think is the proper role of the artist? Do you agree? Why or why not?

Topic for Discussion 2

Baldwin makes the claim that every African American must struggle against the impulse to express his anger toward racism in violent acts. Do you think this is a fair generalization?

Topic for Discussion 3

Baldwin expresses the view that even when we think we have moved beyond a certain point in our history, our past remains with us and marks our culture. Thus, though the United States has abolished slavery, we do not live in a post-race society. African Americans may no longer be slaves, but the societal effects of slavery remain with us in the poverty and discrimination that so many African Americans face. Baldwin was writing before the achievements of the Civil Rights movement. Do you think the Civil Rights movement managed to undo the effects of America's shameful history of mistreating African Americans, or do you think Baldwin is right to say that the past is never totally transcended?

Topic for Discussion 4

Have you ever felt like an outsider? Did this give you a unique perspective on the dynamics of the group that you felt excluded from?

Topic for Discussion 5

Baldwin's voice is prophetic, but his relationship to religion was complicated. He was raised as a Christian and drew from that tradition heavily throughout his life, but he was not a religious man per se. What in Baldwin's thought and style do you see as being distinctly religious? What is distinctly non-religious?



Topic for Discussion 6

Baldwin says that when African Americans manage to carve out a real identity for themselves that escapes the stereotypes of white American culture, American culture itself will be transformed. Do you think this has happened?