The Rockpile Study Guide

The Rockpile by James Baldwin

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Introduction

James Baldwin's "The Rockpile" was first published in 1965 in the author's first and only short story collection, *Going to Meet the Man.* Critics believe that it may have been written much earlier, when Baldwin was working on his 1953 novel, Go *Tell It on the Mountain.* The short story draws on the same pool of characters from the novel, and the main incident in "The Rockpile" is similar to a scene from the novel. In "The Rockpile," which takes place in Depression-era Harlem, John, the illegitimate son of Elizabeth Grimes, is unable to stop his brother, Roy, from getting into a fight on a rockpile with some other African-American boys. Roy gets hurt, and John gets blamed by his stepfather, although Elizabeth faces her husband and sticks up for John. When the story was first published in the 1960s, America was in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, in which Baldwin was an active participant. The story addresses the issue of violence between African-American men, the violence inherent in African-American families, and the power of religion in Depression-era Harlem. Most critics consider Baldwin's short stories inferior to his novels, which are in turn considered inferior to his essays. Baldwin's short stories contain many of the same themes he explores in other works and offer a portrait of the artist at various stages of his writing development. A current copy of the story can be found in the paperback version of *Going to Meet the Man,* which was published by Vintage Books in 1995.

Author Biography

James Baldwin, the illegitimate child of Berdis Emma Jones, was born in Harlem, New York, on August 2, 1924. Baldwin was the eldest of nine children and spent much of his time raising his younger brothers and sisters while his mother worked. This helped to shelter Baldwin from the harsh reality of Harlem street life during the Great Depression. Baldwin's stepfather, David Baldwin, was a religious man who ran a storefront church in addition to his day job. David forced his religious practices on all of his children, including the author, who tried unsuccessfully to please him. Failing to receive affection from his overworked mother and emotionally distant stepfather, Baldwin escaped into the world of literature, reading every book he could find. Throughout his public education, his own literary gifts were recognized and encouraged by influential people in his schools.

At fourteen, he underwent an intense religious conversion experience and formed his own ministry, which eventually rivaled his stepfather's church. Baldwin became disillusioned and left the church when he learned about the historical role of Christianity in the slavery of his ancestors. Baldwin moved to New Jersey, where he found work—and a vicious racism that he had not experienced in the mostly African-American community of Harlem. In 1943, Baldwin moved to New York's Greenwich Village, a poor artist community, where he started publishing in magazines and began work on a novel. He met his literary idol, Richard Wright, who helped Baldwin to secure a Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Trust Award, a gift that provides funds to help new writers finish their books. In 1948, Baldwin moved to Paris, where he remained for nearly a decade, only coming home for brief visits. In 1953, Baldwin published his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* which drew heavily on the troubled relationship with his stepfather and his profound religious experience. The novel also provided the characters for "The Rockpile," which was published in Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* (1965).

By the time Baldwin published this short story collection, the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, and Baldwin had published a few collections of essays that discussed his own and others' experiences as an African American. These books included *The Fire Next Time* (1963), one of the books that helped Baldwin achieve celebrity status as a civil rights leader. In *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone,* Baldwin addressed the difficulty inherent in trying to be both a celebrity and an artist. During the 1970s, Baldwin focused more on his art, publishing several books. These included a best selling novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974). In 1985, Baldwin published *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985.* Since the 1940s, Baldwin had lived off and on in France, where he found a greater acceptance of his homosexuality. He eventually settled in St. Paul de Vence, a French countryside town, where he died of stomach cancer on December 1 (some sources say November 30) in 1987.

Plot Summary

"The Rockpile" begins with a description of the natural rock formation that gives the story its title. The rockpile is located across the street from the apartment of John Grimes and his African-American family. John's half-brother, Roy, plays there sometimes and watches as other African-American boys fight on the rockpile . Elizabeth, John's and Roy's mother, has forbidden them to go near the rockpile, which does not bother John, who is afraid of it. John and Roy have a habit of sitting on their fire escape every Saturday and watching the church members, whom they consider redeemed, and the others, whom they consider sinners, walk along the street. The neighborhood in which they live is filled with dangers, including the Harlem River, where a boy drowned once.

One Saturday, John and Roy are sitting on the fire escape. John draws a picture while Roy is bored. Some of Roy's friends call for him, and Roy decides to go downstairs, which worries John, who thinks their mother will find out. Roy encourages John not to tell her and then sneaks outside. John becomes absorbed in his drawing and does not look up for a while. When he does, he sees a gang war on the rockpile and watches as Roy, who is at the top of the rockpile, is hit with a tin can—which cuts open his forehead and knocks him to the ground. John tells Elizabeth, and she and her church friend, Sister McCandless, bring Roy back to the apartment and dress his wound. The two women question John, and he tells them that Roy said he would be back in five minutes. This answer is not good enough for McCandless, who suspects that Gabriel, John's stepfather and Roy's father, will be angry with John. McCandless catches Gabriel on the stairs as he is coming home from work and warns him about Roy's injury.

Gabriel comes into the apartment, deeply concerned about Roy, who is his favorite. Roy is upset and begins to cry when he tries to tell Gabriel what happened. Elizabeth tries to explain for Roy, but Gabriel only gets angry with her and teases her about her physical features. He also criticizes her for not watching Roy, although she says that she cannot possibly do all of her chores and keep an eye on Roy, who has a mind of his own. Gabriel then tries to blame John, but Elizabeth sticks up for John and prevents him from getting beaten, telling Gabriel that Roy got his injury because Gabriel spoils him. Gabriel looks at Elizabeth with pure hatred, which scares her. She composes herself and leaves the room.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The Rockpile is a pile of rocks occupying the empty space between two houses. The two boys, John and Roy, are forbidden by their mother, to play in the rockpile. More specifically, it is Roy who is directly forbidden because the mother knows that John would probably not take the risk anyway. Therefore, each Saturday morning, the boys sit on the fire escape of their home and longingly watch other boys playing on the rockpile. Their mother, Elizabeth, usually sat in the room behind them and sewed or helped their younger sister Delilah, or took care of the baby boy Paul.

Once Saturday, while their mother was in the kitchen having tea with Sister McCandless, Roy is unable to resist the urge to play with the boys and sneaks out to the pile despite John's protest. He tells John that he will be back in five minutes and not to tell their mother. It's unclear as to how much time passes between Roy leaving the fire-escape, playing on the rockpile, climbing to the top of the pile, getting hit by an empty tin can on his forehead just above his eye, and tumbling down from the top of the rockpile. John calls out to his mother for help and she and Sister McCandless rush downstairs and take Roy from the arms of a man who has picked him up.

While nursing him, they realize that his injuries are minor. He has, however, been hurt near one of his eyes and could have potentially lost his eye. John is afraid that he will be blamed for Roy's injury because he allowed Roy to sneak down to and play at the rockpile. He is even more afraid of he stepfather, Gabriel, who is expected to show up at the apartment any minute. There is an added dimension to John's fear since Gabriel is John's stepfather but Roy's real father. John avoids answering the question of who let Roy go down to play and sticks to the refrain of "He said he'd be back in five minutes," when asked by the Sister. Later when his mother asks him the same question he says, "It wasn't my fault. I couldn't stop him from going downstairs."

His mother understands that John is telling the truth and tells him that he should not worry and that he should simply tell his father the truth.

When the father Gabriel arrives, he assesses Roy's injuries. He is upset about the fact that Roy could have lost an eye, blames the mother and asks about John's whereabouts when the accident occurred. At first, the mother avoids connecting Roy's sneaking away to his brother John's lax in responsibility but when the father keeps pressing, she finally declares that it was not John's fault. She further continues to blame the father for spoiling Roy such that he would take the liberty of disobeying his mother's directive. Gabriel becomes angry at the blame directed toward him and hates her for it.

The story ends with John picking up Gabriel's lunchbox as instructed by his mother in a scene indicating that, however temporary, order has been restored in the household by the mother's assertiveness.

Analysis

The pile of rocks is assigned a mysterious and forbidden characteristic in the beginning of the short story, foreshadowing its role in the events that eventually unfold.

More than just telling a story, this short narrative delves into the psyches of all the people involved and gives the reader a glimpse of the potential future of the characters. We know that the younger brother, Roy, might get into trouble again in the future. On the other hand, he might learn from this incident and become more careful. We also learn that John is already a very careful person and is likely to continue in that path. His future is dependent, however, on his mother protecting him from the wrath of his stepfather. As long as his mother is around to take care of him, he will be all right. His stepfather is the unpredictable factor in all of their lives. His stepfather's temper can be unwarranted and potentially dangerous if not checked.

Despite the presence of all the other characters and the main plot centering on Roy's injury, this story is mostly about John. In the context of the accident suffered by his younger stepbrother, John's life is depicted in the story and provides a potential foreshadowing of his future. Possibly drawing upon his own childhood, Baldwin creates a little boy who is at the mercy of a volatile and cruel stepfather, Gabriel. James Arthur Baldwin was born in 1924 in the Harlem area of New York City. He died in 1987. He was the illegitimate child of a domestic worker and was raised by his stepfather, a factory worker. His stepfather, a preacher, was known to be a harsh man.

Since his father was a preacher, the Baldwin household undoubtedly was influenced by religious practices and beliefs. These themes are scattered throughout this short story. Church-members wave at the boys on Saturday morning when the boys sit on the fire escape. The mother is hosting a Sister at her house when Roy's injury occurs. Sister McCandless talks about going to Tarry Service, which is a prayer meeting.

Characters

Delilah Grimes

Delilah Grimes is John's half-sister and the second-youngest child of Elizabeth and Gabriel. Elizabeth uses Delilah as a shield to try to ward off Gabriel's aggression towards her.

Elizabeth Grimes

Elizabeth is Gabriel's wife and the mother of John, Roy, Delilah, and Paul. Elizabeth had John out of wedlock with another man and, as a result, Gabriel does not treat his stepson as well as he does his own son, Roy. Elizabeth, like the others, is constantly threatened by Gabriel's violent tendencies, and she nervously awaits her husband's arrival after Roy has been hurt. When Gabriel accuses her of neglecting Roy, she stands up for herself, saying that Roy is stubborn, just like Gabriel, and that she cannot control Roy. She also intervenes on John's behalf, saving him from a potential beating.

Reverend Gabriel Grimes

The Reverend Gabriel Grimes is Elizabeth's husband and the father of Roy, Delilah, and Paul. He is also the stepfather of John, whom he does not treat as well as his own son, Roy. Gabriel makes fun of his wife and John, whom he treats as separate from the other family members. Gabriel has a fiery temper and has instilled in his children an acute awareness of sin. However, he is unable to see that he has spoiled Roy, a fact that encourages Roy to get into trouble. Gabriel has a violent temper and takes it out through beatings on his family. This fact becomes evident not through the actual beatings, although Elizabeth mentions them, but by the fear that Elizabeth, John, and Roy experience in Gabriel's presence—and in some cases even at the thought of his arrival.

John Grimes

John Grimes is Elizabeth's son, Gabriel's stepson, and the half-brother of Roy, Delilah, and Paul. John was born out of wedlock to Elizabeth when she was with another man. As a result, Gabriel does not treat him as well as he does his other children. John is subject to ridicule about his physical features and his intelligence. John is not as adventurous as Roy and is in fact afraid of Roy's friends and the rockpile on which they fight. John tries to stop Roy from sneaking out to the rockpile, but Roy, although he is younger, has a stronger will than John does. As a result, John is afraid to stop him. When Roy gets hurt, John calls his mother for help and eventually explains to her that he was not able to stop Roy from leaving. Whereas his mother sticks up for John's actions by telling Gabriel that John cannot stop Roy from getting into trouble, Gabriel

blames John for letting Roy get hurt. In contrast to Roy's rebellious nature, John is the obedient son, doing whatever he is told.

Roy Grimes

Roy Grimes is John's half-brother and the son of Elizabeth and Gabriel. Roy is always looking for trouble and finds it in the rockpile located across the street from their apartment. Although John tries to talk him out of going, Roy sneaks down to go fight on the rockpile and gets cut by a tin can in the process. When Elizabeth and Sister McCandless get Roy back to the apartment, they clean the wound and see that it is a superficial cut but that Roy is close to losing an eye. Roy is frightened at what his father will say, but his father is sympathetic towards Roy—saving his anger for his wife and John.

Introduction

Sister McCandless is Elizabeth's friend and a member of her church. McCandless prepares Gabriel, letting him know that Roy has been injured. watching

Themes

Violence in Harlem

"The Rockpile" addresses the issue of violence in Harlem. The story explores the issue in two ways. First, it examines violence among community members. In the beginning of the story, the narrator discusses the fights that take place on the rockpile during the afternoons and on Saturdays and Sundays: "They fought on the rockpile. Sure footed, dangerous, and reckless, they rushed each other and grappled on the heights." Later in the story, Roy becomes one of these boys, going over to the rockpile "with his friends." Roy's friends soon clash with another group of boys: "there was a gang fight on the rockpile. Dozens of boys fought each other." While this violence ends in Roy getting a cut above his eye, the damage is not as fierce as that caused by the emotional violence in the story. In the Grimes family, Gabriel rules with an iron fist.

Though his children and wife do receive beatings by his hand, the anticipation and threat of these beatings affects them even more. When Roy is lying on the couch waiting for his father to come in and see that he has been in a fight, Elizabeth notes that Roy is keeping his eyes closed. Yet, Elizabeth knows "that he was not sleeping; he wished to delay until the last possible moment any contact with his father." John is also terrified of Gabriel, his stepfather. "The child stared at the man in fascination and terror." Gabriel reserves his strongest intimidation for his wife. He stares at her, and "she found in his face not fury alone, which would not have surprised her; but hatred so deep as to become insupportable in its lack of personality." Reacting to this hate, Elizabeth, who is holding a child, moves the child as if it is a shield that will protect her from Gabriel.

Responsibility

In the aftermath of Roy's injury, Gabriel and Elizabeth offer different ideas about who is responsible. Gabriel first blames Elizabeth for not watching Roy close enough to prevent him from leaving the apartment. "Lord have mercy," he said, "you think you ever going to learn to do right? Where was you when all this happened? Who let him go downstairs?" Gabriel refuses to admit that Roy is responsible for himself. This is not the case with Elizabeth: "Ain't nobody let him go downstairs, he just went. He got a head just like his father, it got to be broken before it'll bow." Next, Gabriel tries to blame John, his stepson, for not stopping Roy from leaving or telling Elizabeth that Roy left. When John remains silent to Gabriel's questions, Gabriel threatens to whip him. It is at this point that Elizabeth sticks up for John and places the blame for Roy's accident squarely on Gabriel's shoulders. "Ain't a soul to blame for Roy's lying up there now but you—you because you done spoiled him so that he thinks he can do just anything and get away with it."

Religion

The story is saturated with religious references. Religion is not a comforting or joyful presence in the Grimes household or in the neighborhood in which they live. Instead, it is something to be feared and obeyed. Gabriel is a reverend, and he has raised his children to be God-fearing individuals. As a result, they see the world in extremes of people who are saved and people who are sinners. When John and Roy are sitting on the fire escape, they look down to the street, where "below them, men and women, and boys and girls, sinners all, loitered." These people are contrasted with the churchgoers, "the redeemed," who will sometimes wave to the sinners, unnerving them. "Then, for the moment that they waved decorously back, they were intimidated." Religion is also used as a threat. When Elizabeth criticizes Gabriel for spoiling Roy, she warns her husband that he needs to seek God's help before it is too late: "You don't pray to the Lord to help you do better than you been doing, you going to live to shed bitter tears that the Lord didn't take his soul today."

Style

Setting

The setting is very important in the story. Since the early twentieth century until the time that Baldwin wrote the story, Harlem had one of the most concentrated areas of African Americans. Among these residents, violence was common, especially during the years of the Great Depression when this story takes place. In these lean times, tempers flared more easily among African-American males, even the boys who are depicted in the story. The physical setting is important for two other reasons. The Grimes's apartment building is located across the street from a large rockpile, which is essential for setting up Roy's injury. Since the rockpile is in sight of the Grimes's fire escape, Roy watches others fight there and yearns to go fight himself: "Roy shifted impatiently, and continued to stare at the street, as though in this gazing he might somehow acquire wings." If the rockpile were not right in view of Roy, taunting him with its forbidden quality, he might not have been motivated to go fight. Finally, the story takes place near the Harlem River, in which an African-American boy drowned.

Imagery

The imagery in the story underscores the violence theme of the story. From the very beginning, the story offers several examples, real or imagined, of violent events. John's Aunt Florence, when explaining why the alien rockpile is still on the empty lot, concocts a violent story. She "had once told them that the rock was there and could not be taken away because without it the subway cars underground would fly apart, killing all the people." When Roy and the other boys fight on the rockpile, their fight is depicted in the violent images of boys "clambering up the rocks and battling hand to hand, scuffed shoes sliding on the slippery rock." The boys "filled the air, too, with flying weapons: stones; sticks, tin cans, garbage, whatever could be picked up and thrown." When Gabriel tries to touch Roy's wound, Roy recoils, suddenly remembering the image of his fall—"the height, the sharp, sliding rock beneath his feet, the sun, the explosion of the sun, his plunge into darkness and his salty blood." In addition to the violent images, the story also offers one chilling image of a child's death, as if to emphasize the frailty of a child's life in Harlem. The image comes after a little boy has drowned in the river. The boy's father, Richard, carries his dead son through the neighborhood: "Richard's father and Richard were wet, and Richard's body lay across his father's arms like a cotton baby."

Symbolism

The story also contains several symbols. A symbol is a physical object, action, or gesture that also represents an abstract concept, without losing its original identity. Most of the symbols in the story are local, meaning that their abstract meaning is dependent

upon the context of the story. For example, the rockpile is physically a rock formation. In the way that it is depicted in the story, the hard rocks and the fights that take place there become symbols for the hard struggles faced by African Americans in the Harlem ghetto. The rock is "slippery," making it hard for the children to get a stable foothold, just as it is hard for them to get a stable foothold in their lives in the Harlem ghetto. It represents a challenge to the boys, something that needs to be conquered. Boys fight to reach the top, as Roy does, where they can declare themselves king of the mountain. This is similar to the social struggle that these African-American boys will face all of their adult lives, fighting with their brethren for food, homes, and other resources needed for their survival. Although the boys fight there most days, the rockpile is never affected, and nobody ever wins the fights. Inevitably, one of the boys will get hurt, as Roy does with the tin can: "Immediately, one side of Roy's face ran with blood, he fell and rolled on his face down the rocks." The boys then run away and keep their distance for a while, but they will soon come back to fight again. It is the pattern of their boyhood, and it will continue to be the pattern of their hard adult lives.

Other symbols in the story include Gabriel's hands and feet, which become potential weapons in the way that Elizabeth views them: "John stood just before him, it seemed to her astonished vision just below him, beneath his fist, his heavy shoe." The description of the shoe as "heavy," coupled with the image of Gabriel as an "enormous" man, makes the shoe seem dangerous, like it might be used to crush John. In fact, Baldwin elaborates on this symbol in the last sentence of the story: John bends to pick up his father's lunchbox, "bending his dark head near the toe of his father's heavy shoe." Here, the symbol becomes more focused. When people kick something, they generally lead with their toe. John's head near Gabriel's toe sets up the apprehension in Elizabeth, and the reader, that Gabriel, who has illustrated his tendency towards violence, is entirely capable of kicking John in the head.

Historical Context

Harlem during the Great Depression

The Great Depression was one of the largest tragedies of the twentieth century, and it affected a wide range of people. When the stock market crashed in 1929, the mainly African-American population assumed that this was a white problem, since African Americans in the Harlem ghetto did not typically own stocks. As it turned out, the people of Harlem were the hardest hit in New York. During the Great Depression, many unskilled workers were laid off or had their wages cut. Because the majority of African-American workers were unskilled, they were seriously affected. In addition, before the depression, many African Americans had worked in low paid, working-class positions that white people did not want. Therefore, many African Americans had some degree of job security. As the unemployment rate increased during the 1930s, many of these traditionally African-American positions were given to whites. This was a sign of the racism and discrimination that was still inherent in the United States more than fifty years after the Civil War.

Buildings

Some of the discrimination in Harlem was in pricing. As more African Americans moved into Harlem, white building owners charged increasingly exorbitant rents. To pay the higher rents, many families moved in together or took in boarders to help shoulder the rent load. As a result, the population continued to swell, and the buildings became dilapidated from overuse and lack of repairs. While the people in Harlem got poorer, not too far away the rich were getting richer. Even during the depression, when most of the country was struggling to make ends meet, signs of enormous wealth were being erected south of Harlem, in the Manhattan business district. The proximity of the massive skyscrapers, including the new Chrysler and Empire State Buildings—completed in 1930 and 1931, respectively—were further evidence of the divide between the haves and the have-nots.

Riots

A combination of factors—discrimination, joblessness, high rents, overcrowding, and obvious signs of inequality—helped to enrage the Harlem residents, who often took out their aggressions on each other. On one notable occasion, March 19, 1935, the violence turned into a riot against whites. A Harlem boy was caught stealing a small knife from a white-owned store. The boy fought with the staff, hit a clerk, and ended up being taken away by the police, although he was later released. Bystanders spread wild rumors that the boy had been beaten or killed, and these rumors got worse when an ambulance arrived to help the injured clerk and when an unrelated hearse parked by the store. Harlem residents swarmed the streets, breaking windows, looting, and attacking city

buses, while police tried to break up the disturbance. In the process, three African Americans were killed, two hundred were wounded, and millions of dollars' worth of property damage was done to the city. Following the riot, New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia commissioned a biracial study of the causes of the riot. The study results underscored the economic and social problems in Harlem, and the mayor and others worked to build more housing and reduce the racism among police and others.

The Civil Rights Movement

Despite these efforts and advances, conditions in Harlem—and in other African-American communities —continued to deteriorate over the next few decades. It is unclear whether Baldwin completed "The Rockpile" in the 1950s when he wrote *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or finished it in the 1960s prior to its publication in *Going to Meet the Man.* In any case, over these two particular decades, civil rights became an increasingly important issue. Court cases and legislation reinforced the growing trend of desegregation and imposed bans on discrimination, and many African Americans in Harlem and elsewhere organized boycotts and nonviolent protests. Not all protests were peaceful, however. On July 16, 1964, a white police officer shot and killed a fifteen-year-old African-American boy. The combined New York chapters of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sponsored a peaceful protest of the death, which resulted in violence between the protesters and police. The situation quickly turned into a riot, which spread to other parts of New York City.

Critical Overview

"The Rockpile" was first published in *Going to Meet the Man*(1965), a short-story collection that has received mixed reviews. In 1965, in the *Saturday Review,* Daniel Stern praised the collection, calling the short stories "closer in spirit, tone, and achievement to his best critical work than it is to his 'sensational' fiction. These are stories beautifully made to frame genuine experience in a lyrical language." On the other hand, in his 1965 *New Republic review,* Joseph Featherstone says that the collection is "problematic" and notes, "There are no resolutions here, no new departures." Likewise, in 1966, in *Partisan Review,* Stephen Donadio says that the stories "add nothing to Mr. Baldwin's stature, nor do they diminish it by much." However, a decade later, in 1975, in his review for *Studies in Short Fiction,* William Peden calls the book "the most important single short story collection" since the Harlem Renaissance, referring to the 1920s in Harlem, when there was an explosion of artistic output from African-American writers. In his 1978 entry on Baldwin for *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Fred L. Standley gives the stories high praise, saying that they "indicate clearly the influence of Henry James." Standley also notes that "the stories reflect the range of Baldwin's early thematic interests and demonstrate a realistic sense of personal experiences." Finally, in his 1978 book, *James Baldwin,* Louis H. Pratt says, "These stories attempt to probe directly into the essence of the black experience in the United States and to expose the myths and the realities which lie at the root of that experience."

While the reviews of the collection are mixed, the discussion of "The Rockpile" is almost nonexistent. The critics who have talked about the story do so in comparison to Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* since the two works contain similar characters, themes, and events. In his 1979 entry on Baldwin for *American Writers,* Keneth Kinnamon notes, "'The Rockpile' and 'The Outing' clearly belong to the body of autobiographical material out of which *Go Tell It on the Mountain* comes." Standley says that the two stories "strongly resemble" the novel, whereas Donadio thinks that the entire collection represents "the author's progress" as a writer and considers "The Rockpile" and "The Outing" as "halting first steps toward the first novel." In his 1977 essay for *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation,* Harry L. Jones is even more blunt. His essay examines the short stories in *Going to Meet the Man* but deliberately chooses not to discuss "The Rockpile" or "The Outing." Jones feels they "are obviously culls or unused remnants from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and ought best to be considered in connection with that work. They will not, therefore, be discussed here."

In fact, one of the only critics to discuss "The Rockpile" in detail is Carolyn Wedin Sylvander. In her 1980 book, *James Baldwin,* she too compares the short story to *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* However, Sylvander conducts an analysis of the differences between the two works and notes that the major event in "The Rockpile"—Roy's injury—is similar to one of the scenes in the novel, where Roy also gets hurt. Beyond this similarity, Sylvander finds several "significant" differences between the two works. These include the fact that John is not present when Roy has his injury in the novel and so has no responsibility, whereas in the short story he is there when Roy gets injured.

Sylvander also notes that in the novel, Roy fights white boys, but in the short story, he fights African-American boys.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette compares Baldwin's story to his novel Go Tell It on the Mountain.

When Baldwin published his first and only short story collection in 1965, it included two stories— "The Rockpile" and "The Outing." Most critics note that these two stories share similar aspects with the author's 1953 novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* Some critics, like Harry L. Jones in his essay for *James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation,* find these similarities to be proof that the stories should only be discussed in conjunction with the novel. Says Jones, they "are obviously culls or unused remnants from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and ought best to be considered in connection with that work." However, this is a misconception, especially in the case of "The Rockpile." Despite the similarities between this short story and its corresponding scene in the novel, the differences between the two works highlight the unique purpose of each one.

It certainly appears that Baldwin wrote "The Rockpile," or at least its initial draft, during the process of writing *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* The story is more than just a "halting first step" in the process of writing this novel, as Stephen Donadio calls it in *Partisan Review.* If Baldwin considered the story to be a mistake, he most likely would not have included it twelve years later in a collection. The short story has its own merits, which become apparent when one reads "The Rockpile" and compares it to the corresponding scene depicting Roy's injury in the novel. As Carolyn Wedin Sylvander says in her book, *James Baldwin,* the differences between the two works "are significant." Sylvander notes several, including the fact that Roy fights with other African Americans in the short story, whereas in the novel he fights with white boys; the fact that the fight takes place across the street in the short story and across town in the novel; and the fact that John has responsibility for Roy in the short story and is not responsible for Roy's action in the novel.

In addition to the differences pointed out by Sylvander, more differences are apparent when readers examine the two works in even greater detail. The short story draws attention to its immediate surroundings with the first sentence: "Across the street from their house, in an empty lot between two houses, stood the rockpile. It was a strange place to find a mass of natural rock jutting out of the ground." As the story continues, this hard rockpile becomes symbolic of the violence that takes place there and of the harsh lives that the African-American boys face—and will face in the future. The entire story, with its limited setting, has a confining feel, which emphasizes the trapped quality of life in Harlem during the Great Depression. The novel scene, on the other hand, does not have a specific, isolated setting. Instead, it starts out with a more open feeling: "As John approached his home again in the late afternoon, he saw little Sarah, her coat unbuttoned, come flying out of the house." John is coming home from another part of the city, which implies that he is not confined to the immediate area of his street.

Also, in the novel, John does not see Roy's fight. Sarah's actions tip John off to the fact that something is wrong, but he only finds out about the fight when Sarah says, "Roy got stabbed with a knife!" In the short story, however, John is trapped at his house and has no choice but to see Roy's fight. As a result, the story offers an in-depth depiction of the fight from John's perspective: "Dozens of boys fought each other in the harsh sun. . . . filling the bright air with curses and jubilant cries." The story goes on to describe Roy's ascension to the top of the rockpile and his subsequent injury and fall. By doing this, the story places extra emphasis on the fight itself, underscoring the brutality of Harlem's African Americans towards each other. In the novel, the fight with the white boys takes place outside of the narration and is barely described. Violence between whites and African Americans had been going on for centuries, so nothing was special about a simple stabbing. As a result, Baldwin does not give the incident extra importance through heavy description. Aggression against one's own, however, was a disturbing trend that the pressures of Harlem ghetto life helped to increase. Since African Americans were packed into overcrowded, overpriced houses and were constantly subject to discrimination and persecution from the outside world, the isolation of a community like Harlem sometimes led to residents taking out their aggressions against each other.

Even the weapons used in the fight indicate a difference in focus on life outside Harlem as opposed to life inside. A knife is inherently a weapon, especially the kind of fighting knife that the white boys most likely used to cut Roy. As a result, the use of a knife to stab Roy in the novel does not come as a surprise to Baldwin's readers, many of whom were white. A tin can—the "weapon" that Roy gets cut with in the story—is not inherently a weapon at all. The fact that Roy is hurt by what is essentially a piece of garbage indicates the poverty faced by African-American people in the story. They cannot even afford weapons, and so must use "stones, sticks, tin cans, garbage, whatever could be picked up and thrown."

Although "The Rockpile" and its corresponding scene in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* share the same incident, some of the same characters, and similar themes, they are really two different stories. For this reason, it makes sense that Baldwin chose not to include "The Rockpile" version in his novel. The novel focuses on John's quest to find his identity and faith. As a result, the scene with Roy's stabbing is minimized, and more emphasis is placed on the relations between African Americans and whites—a consistent theme throughout the novel. In the short story, however, the main issue is one of violence, specifically among African Americans. This violence is largely due to the discriminatory treatment that African Americans have faced at the hands of whites, a fact that is not emphasized in the story.

So why would Baldwin decide not to publish this short story until the mid-1960s, when it was most likely written much earlier? By examining the historical context of the 1950s and 1960s, one can offer a potential reason. In the 1950s, at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, many African-American leaders spoke out against injustices and violence they faced at the hands of whites. With its offhand and minimal description of Roy's fight with the white boys, the novel underscores this feeling, making it seem like the incident is just one of many.

In the short story, on the other hand, African Americans take out their aggressions on each other, and Baldwin gives the incident a significant amount of description. Violence among African Americans was not a fact that Baldwin or others would have wanted to publicize to the white community during the early part of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. To do so would have been to reinforce the stereotype of African Americans as savages and would thus have undercut the ability of African Americans to be treated as equals with whites. Because of this realization, during the 1950s and early 1960s, African Americans focused primarily on nonviolent methods of protest. However, by the mid-1960s when Baldwin published "The Rockpile," there had been a profound split in the ranks of African Americans. While some still pursued a nonviolent approach, an increasing number of African Americans did not think this was effective enough and began to favor other, more violent approaches. It could be that this story is a warning to other African Americans that violence is not the right answer and can only lead to harm in one's own community. By isolating the African Americans in the story, the author shows them to be ultimately responsible for their own actions—and their own destruction.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Rockpile," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Harris examines connections and differences in characterization between Baldwin's "The Rockpile" and Go Tell It on the Mountain.

"The Rockpile" shares several parallels with *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* but it also deviates from the novel in its portrayal of the character of Elizabeth. The story recounts in concentrated detail the incident of Roy's fight and injury which, in the novel, takes place on the Saturday of John's birthday. Baldwin apparently found the story form too constricting in what it allowed him to accomplish in the development of Gabriel's character as well as Elizabeth's. They both have features similar to those they have in the novel, but the background information on how they came to be as they are cannot be handled very effectively within the story. For example, Gabriel is presented as an angry man, but we can only speculate on the causes of his anger. Elizabeth, obviously frightened of Gabriel, similarly lacks the extensive background that would make her interaction with him clearer. As the story is written, the lines of sympathy are drawn, but they are not as clear as they are in the novel. Because Gabriel is left fumbling at the end of the story, instead of performing a conclusive act such as the slapping in the novel, we are also left hanging. We have only been told that Gabriel is a villain; we have not seen any action in the story that would convince us of that. Therefore, there is no conclusive reaction to Gabriel as the authoritarian controller of his family that he is implied to be. The novel makes motivation clearer, sets up an uncluttered division of sympathies, and brings a conclusive resolution to the scene. The story is left at a level of frustration in which extraneous factors are allowed to obscure Gabriel's true personality.

We get two pieces of evidence that let us know that religion is prominent in the lives of the characters and that therefore allow us to judge what they do and say against what they profess to be. First of all, Sister McCandless is visiting the household when the injury to Roy occurs. The fact that she is "Sister" McCandless lets us know that she is connected to a church, and the fact that she is visiting Elizabeth lets us know that these are active members of the church. Second, after the injury but before Gabriel's arrival on the scene, Sister McCandless refers to him as "the Reverend." We now know that this is the preacher's house the good sister is visiting and, from what our experiences have told us about preachers, we expect a tolerant if not an unqualifiedly good man (we already have indications from John's and Roy's reaction that Gabriel is strict); her tone, however, leaves enough ambivalence for us to perhaps anticipate revising our initial expectations.

In contrast to Elizabeth, who is presented as a concerned mother, though not a frightening one, Gabriel is presented as a frowner upon enjoyment who will come home early this Saturday and "end" the boys' freedom of sitting on the fire escape; he is a force of disapproval, from the boys' point of view, from the very first paragraphs of the story. No longer mired in the soapsuds washing image we last have of her before Roy's injury in *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* in the story Elizabeth leaves Roy and John on the

fire escape to go into the kitchen "to sip tea with Sister McCandless." Roy slips away to the rockpile across the street, where the fight will shortly occur.

Two differences in Elizabeth's portrayal are relevant here. First, the oppressive routine of work is momentarily lifted. No matter how well earned the break, that moment of seeming idleness could support, from Gabriel's point of view, the idea that Elizabeth is negligent of her children. She has gone to "sip" tea, which has sociability and lightheartedness as its connotations, not responsibility. Though she has warned her sons, especially Roy, of the dangers involved in playing on the rockpile, and has witnessed the dangerous play, she has left them in a tempting position while she tends her company. That is the kind of case Gabriel could make against her, because he disapproves of his sons sitting on the fire escape. Second, Elizabeth's realm of action in the incident is extended beyond the apartment; she and Sister McCandless run out to meet the man who picks up Roy after his injury. The action simultaneously increases her concern and heightens the guilt that Gabriel can use against her. She runs out in panic, with Sister McCandless behind her panting "Don't fret, don't fret." Elizabeth is "trembling" when she tries to take Roy, so the "bigger calmer" Sister McCandless takes him instead. Though the man keeps emphasizing that Roy's injury is "just a flesh wound," that it "just broke the skin, that's all," Elizabeth is frantic. Her reaction borders on hysteria, in sharp contrast to the more stoic Elizabeth in *Go Tell It on the Mountain.*

The near hysteria has as its base an ever-present fear of Gabriel. Elizabeth is almost paralyzed into inactivity because of feelings of guilt probably induced by Gabriel's previous accusations and the anticipated resurgence of guilt once Gabriel arrives on the scene. Her fear combines with the comment that the boys see Gabriel as an end to their freedom to suggest that Gabriel is a terror who makes his entire family uncomfortable; he does so by evoking feelings in them which control certain parts of their behavior even in his absence. Although the scar is "jagged," which would suggest an injury more serious than is the case, it is also "superficial"; yet Elizabeth murmurs, "Lord, have mercy . . . another inch and it would've been his eye." That line belongs to Gabriel later in "The Rockpile" and in *Go Tell It on Mountain,* where he exaggerates the wound in order to underscore Elizabeth's presumed negligence. Even as she makes the comment, she looks "with apprehension" toward the clock, knowing that Gabriel will be home shortly and that she will be held accountable no matter what her degree of responsibility.

Elizabeth's actions show that roles and expectations are more important to Gabriel than people. He values her primarily as the mother of his children, especially of Roy. She is expected to cook and clean for them, to protect them, and to know their whereabouts at all times. If she fails in her role, she must endure the consequences. Her nervous actions before Gabriel's arrival illustrate that she is perfectly aware and fearful of those consequences. She asks Sister McCandless "nervously" if Roy is going to keep the scar. The woman's response reveals a lot about Elizabeth and about Gabriel: "'Lord, no,' said Sister McCandless, 'ain't nothing but a scratch, I declare, Sister Grimes, you worse than a child. Another couple of weeks and you won't be able to see no scar. No, you go on about your housework, honey, and thank the Lord it weren't no worse.' She opened

the door; they heard the sound of feet on the stairs. 'I expect that's the Reverend,' said Sister McCandless, placidly, 'I bet he going to raise cain.'"

The guilt that both Elizabeth and John feel causes them to realize that, blameworthy or not, they will both be implicated in Roy's injury. That realization comes out in John's declaration to Elizabeth that Roy's crossing the street to the rockpile was not "my fault" and his sense that Elizabeth's response that he "ain't got nothing to worry about" does not bring the comfort it should. It could be speculated, in fact, that John is somewhat taken aback by his mother's rather placid response; he looks at her in a direct, questioning way, but she turns to look out the window. From past experiences, both Elizabeth and John know that Roy is Gabriel's "heart" and that injury to him is a personal affront to Gabriel. They have both apparently been made to feel that they are intruders who are suffered but not loved, tolerated but not valued. And they have both been taught to know that the fault is within themselves, that they are somehow guilty and must suffer whatever befalls them. Elizabeth's guilt probably derives from John's illegitimacy, but John himself is unaware of that fact. From nuances of speech, however, and definitely from Gabriel's actions, John knows that he is not the favored child. In his own defense, therefore, he can only plead his case to Elizabeth, who can offer no appreciable comfort because she continually sees her own unworthiness and guilt reflected in John's actions and mannerisms, in his mere presence. John becomes inarticulate and visibly invisible in ways that are parallel to the anguish Elizabeth herself feels when confronting her husband.

The same tension between John and Gabriel exists here as in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*—or perhaps it is more visible here, since Gabriel literally frightens John into speechlessness—and Elizabeth understands in both instances, but Gabriel refuses to in either. Without Florence's presence, however, the scene with Gabriel is anti-climactic. Standing up to Gabriel and forcing him to place responsibility where it belongs, Elizabeth changes character and becomes much more assertive than her trembling nerves suggested earlier. Her interruptions of Gabriel's questions to Roy and her continuing refusal to be quiet show an Elizabeth who contrasts too directly with the character we have seen earlier in the story:

"How you feel, son? Tell your Daddy what happened?"

Roy opened his mouth to speak and then, relapsing into panic, began to cry. His father held him by the shoulder.

"You don't want to cry. You's Daddy's little man. Tell your Daddy what happened."

"He went downstairs," said Elizabeth, "where he didn't have no business to be, and got to fighting with them bad boys playing on that rockpile. That's what happened and it's a mercy it weren't nothing worse."

He looked up at her. "Can't you let this boy answer for hisself?"

Ignoring this, she went on, more gently: "He got cut on the forehead, but it ain't nothing to worry about?"

"You call a doctor? How you know it'ain't nothing to worry about?"

"Is you got money to be throwing away on doctors? No, I ain't called no doctor. Ain't nothing wrong with my eyes that I can't tell whether he's hurt bad or not.

He got a fright more'n anything else, and you ought to pray God it teaches him a lesson."

"You got a lot to say now," he said, "but I'll have me something to say in a minute. I'll be wanting to know when all this happened, what you was doing with your eyes then."

Tensions underlying this relatively controlled conversation have their basis far beyond the incident itself. Gabriel, who has been presented as destroyer of freedom and a creator of nervous tension in his wife, is all of a sudden a caressing, considerate father who desperately tries to soothe his injured son. The posture is not inconsistent because we know, through Elizabeth, that John is illegitimate and that Roy is Gabriel's oldest son. Gabriel, who wants to show love at this point, is unaccustomed to doing so; he therefore sounds gruff and inadequate, and his efforts at soothing only increase Roy's crying panic. It is only with Elizabeth's assistance that he is able to take the bandage from Roy's face and look at the wound. John, also witnessing the scene, can see that Gabriel's gruff tenderness will never be directed toward him. Elizabeth can see that Gabriel's overindulgence of Roy will forever cause problems for this favored son of his, and she can see, too, that John, who will never give Gabriel any trouble, will always be outside the realm of concern he shows toward Roy. Ironically, though it is not clear if he is aware of it, Gabriel must depend upon Elizabeth if he is to attend Roy properly. The fight may have caused conflict among the family members, but it forces them to work together—John holds the baby while Elizabeth and Gabriel tend to Roy's wound. It is not togetherness that Gabriel wishes to dwell upon, however, for as soon as he is satisfied that the wound is not major, he resumes his accusatory stance toward Elizabeth and John.

Gabriel's anger is undramatized throughout the scene of examining the wound; it is like a volcano waiting to explode. Wondering when Elizabeth will learn to "do right," Gabriel tries to reclaim his authoritarian superiority, but Elizabeth stands firm in maintaining that no one has "let" Roy go downstairs: "He just went. He got a head just like his father, it got to be broken before it'll bow. I was in the kitchen." Elizabeth's retorts force Gabriel to turn on John, who lapses into a silence that Gabriel threatens to break with a strap. "No, you ain't," Elizabeth says. "You ain't going to take no strap to this boy, not today you ain't. Ain't a soul to blame for Roy's lying up there now but you—you because you done spoiled him so that he thinks he can do just anything and get away with it. I'm here to tell you that ain't no way to raise no child. You don't pray to the Lord to help you do better than you been doing, you going to live to shed bitter tears that the Lord didn't take his soul today." Such spunkiness is again too drastic a change in personality from the apprehensive Elizabeth we have seen earlier in the story.

Elizabeth's comment on Gabriel's hard head and her admonition that he should do better than he has been doing neutralize Gabriel's active anger, but the silent intensity

of it remains; she sees fury and hatred in his eyes, which "were struck alive, unmoving, blind with malevolence." The summary of Gabriel's anger, no matter how poignant, still has less force than that of a dramatization. Gabriel has no further speech in the story; he stands in silent fury as Elizabeth, leaving the room, directs John to pick up his father's lunchbox. The silence is problematic because what we know of Gabriel would suggest that it is impossible for him to be calmed into passivity. John scrambles to pick up the box, "bending his dark head near the toe of his father's heavy shoe," the final clause in the story and the final indication of how Gabriel would like to resolve his angry dissatisfaction.

It is easy to see why Baldwin rewrote the story. It lacks dramatization of Gabriel's fury, and it is inconsistent in the development of Elizabeth's character. It is not clear what kind of prior knowledge she would have had of Gabriel's hard head, nor is her suggestive comment that he had better pray to the Lord for improvement ultimately a forceful one. In the novel, Florence is the medium for providing information on Gabriel's background and his own sins: if Elizabeth is to have such knowledge, and present it convincingly, then that knowledge should serve as more of an equalizer in her position in relation to Gabriel; she should not be so panicky, nervous and trembling. In its delineation of character, therefore, as well as its development of motive and action, the novel is much more forceful in presenting the rockpile incident than the story is.

Elizabeth, in standing up to Gabriel, seems to win the argument against him. It can be argued, however, that her changed action does not suggest a substantially changed personality from *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* As a black woman who has mothered an illegitimate son and found a haven in a hardworking churchman, Elizabeth is sensitive to that haven and to her own tainted position. Her actions indicate that she does not wish to allow anything to anger Gabriel because that anger would be turned against her and toward the fact that, to Gabriel, she and John are still interlopers in a paradise that should be forbidden to them. Then, too, it is Elizabeth who leaves the room, not Gabriel. It is she who sees in his eyes his desire "to witness her perdition," not he who is overcome by her spoken fury. In the contest of wills and of self-imposed guilt, it is Elizabeth who finally retreats, not Gabriel. Her retreat would be all the more vivid if Gabriel had slapped her as he did in *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* For without Florence, and without Roy, who has turned into a screaming child instead of the perceptive fatherhater he is in *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* Elizabeth has no other support for her position than the momentary shock of surprising Gabriel with her outburst. Her triumph, therefore, is a pyrrhic victory at best, a slinking away from the battlefield at worst.

Elizabeth has almost unconsciously used one of the children as her defense against Gabriel's retaliation for her outspokenness. After her outburst at Gabriel, she takes Delilah from John and stands looking at Gabriel as if to say, "Trust me; I have mothered your children. How can you assume that I would not want the best for them?" Delilah is her tangible shield against Gabriel's fury, and the child's presence conveniently prevents Gabriel from striking her mother. It is because of the child that the hate and anger Gabriel shows in his eyes finally changes: Elizabeth "moved the child in her arms. And at this his eyes changed, he looked at Elizabeth, the mother of his children, the

helpmeet given by the Lord." Elizabeth must symbolically stand in wait for the change in Gabriel even as she starts to leave the room.

As in *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* then, Elizabeth and her children must live in an environment permeated with tension and potential disapproval. Gabriel's pompous shadow falls on them all, unapprovingly, whether he is present or not. Consequently, Elizabeth has as much personality, in a way, as Gabriel allows, and as much as he is willing to recognize in her role as mother of his children. By her actions and the tone of fear she conveys to us, she almost succeeds in suggesting that Gabriel is somehow correct in his evaluation of her guilt. Her ultimate self-realization depends upon being at peace with Gabriel, who is unquestionably the master of his house and family, but at the end of the story that peace is not even a promise. . . .

Source: Trudier Harris, "To Be Washed Whiter than Snow: *Going to Meet the Man,"* in *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin,* University of Tennessee Press, 1985, pp. 60-95.

Adaptations

Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was adapted as a television movie in 1984 by Learning in Focus. The movie was directed by Stan Lathan and featured Paul Winfield, James Bond III, Alfre Woodard, Ving Rhames, and a cameo role by Baldwin. It is available on VHS from Monterey Home Video.

Topics for Further Study

On a street map of New York, outline Harlem as it existed during the Great Depression. Using the geographic clues in the story, plot the Grimes house, the rockpile, the area where Richard's son drowned, and any other events or locations that you can identify from the story's descriptions.

In the story, the Grimes family lives in a tenement apartment. Research how many African Americans lived in houses, apartments, and other types of housing developments in Harlem during the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Plot both sets of statistics on a chart or graph, and discuss the housing trends between the two time periods.

Research the number of illegitimate African-American children in Harlem during the Great Depression, as compared to the number of illegitimate African-American children today. Write a profile of one famous illegitimate African American —other than James Baldwin.

Research the psychology of violence, and map out the areas of the brain that cause it. Also, research any disorders or diseases that tend to increase violence in a person, and give a thorough description of each one. Finally, research the standard techniques used in a modern angermanagement class, and give a short presentation about these techniques.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: In 1935, Harlem erupts in a riot when an African-American mob falsely believes that an African-American boy has been beaten or killed by a white storeowner.

1960s: In 1964, Harlem erupts in a riot when a black schoolboy is shot and killed by a white police officer in Yorkville, New York. The incident inspires riots in one other New York city and three New Jersey cities. More than two hundred other race-related riots break out from 1965 to 1968 in various cities around the United States, including Detroit and Los Angeles.

Today: In 1992 in Los Angeles, a bystander catches an apparent act of police brutality on videotape, which he then sells to the press. In the resulting court case, a mainly white jury acquits the four white police officers of the beating of Rodney King, an African-American motorist. This verdict enrages many ethnic groups in South Central Los Angeles, including African Americans and Latin Americans, and they subsequently begin rioting in many areas of Los Angeles.

1930s: Joe Louis, an African-American boxer, becomes a symbol of pride and inspiration to many Harlem residents, who cheer his long and successful career. While African Americans experience racism in many forms, even some white people are fans of Louis. When Louis is drafted into the military, he is given the same cold reception that other African Americans receive.

1960s: Following the enormous success in the 1940s of Jackie Robinson—professional baseball's first African-American player—other professional sports experiment with integration, including football, tennis, and basketball. Boxing continues to include African Americans, and one of the most celebrated boxers in the twentieth century, Muhammad Ali, fights during this decade.

Today: The majority of the athletes in certain sports, most notably professional basketball, are African Americans. For some inner-city youths, a basketball career becomes a way to transcend their class and get out of the ghetto.

1930s: During the Great Depression, most African-American families in Harlem live a poor existence, barely making enough money to buy food and essentials, much less entertainment and other auxiliary expenses.

1960s: Many poor African Americans in Harlem use credit plans to buy luxury items like radios, televisions, and cars. By committing most of their future wages to current luxuries, these residents commit themselves to a life of debt. This prevents them from acquiring enough capital to buy real estate and make other investments that could help them transcend their class or move to different communities.

Today: Excessive credit debt is a problem among all races and classes in the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

Most critics believe that Baldwin's best works were his essays. In *The Fire Next Time* (1963), published during the Civil Rights movement, Baldwin wrote extensively about his own adolescence, which mirrored the experiences of John Grimes in "The Rockpile" and *Go Tell It on the Mountain.* The two essays in this book collectively discuss the racial relations between African Americans and whites and note that the two races are ultimately inseparable.

Unlike his other works, including "The Rockpile," Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956) features all white characters. David, an engaged man and a homosexual, struggles to find his sexual identity and reconcile his troubled family past while living abroad in Paris.

Ralph Ellison's classic novel about race, *Invisible Man* (1952), chronicles the experiences of a young, nameless African-American man. Through his travels north to New York City and several misguided attempts to find his identity, the man realizes that he will always be invisible to white people. He also realizes that African Americans are on a self-destructive path that they cannot see.

In George M. Fredrickson's book *Racism: A Short History* (2002), the author gives a brief overview of modern racist attitudes, which he believes were developed from medieval anti- Semitism. Fredrickson also examines and compares various racial institutions, including American Jim Crow laws, Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jews, and South Africa's apartheid regime.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), by Zora Neale Hurston, drew criticism from other African- American writers like Richard Wright, who felt the book's thick dialect stereotyped African Americans. The novel concerns the life of an African-American woman who searches for her identity while living in the South. Modern-day readers credit Hurston's accurate portrayals of the lives of African Americans—especially women —in this time.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), another classic novel about race, concerns the story of Bigger Thomas, a young African-American man in 1930s Chicago. The racism and poverty that he experiences lead to his unintentional murder of a white woman, and he finds that no one—even the liberal men and women who champion racial equality—is able to help him. Baldwin criticized this novel for its stereotypical portrayal of African Americans, an act that forever severed the friendship with Wright, his idol.

Further Study

Anderson, Jervis, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950,* Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982.

Anderson's book offers an in-depth discussion of what life was like in Harlem in the first half of the twentieth century. This cultural study is organized into six parts, which reflect the major movements and historical trends in the city, including the conversion of Harlem into an African-American city, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Great Depression.

Balfour, Katherine Lawrence, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy,* Cornell University Press, 2001.

In this book, Balfour discusses Baldwin's works published in the 1960s, within the context of the author's views about democracy. Balfour also examines the conflicts that these works created among various groups in the Civil Rights movement, compares Baldwin's works to contemporary works that discuss racial conflict, and discusses what role Baldwin's ideas can play in current racial debates.

Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn, "*Or Does It Explode?": Black Harlem in the Great Depression,* Oxford University Press, 1991.

This book offers a comprehensive look at African-American life in Harlem during the Great Depression. Greenberg draws on an extensive amount of statistical data—much of which is included in the book's appendices—and offers several anecdotes from the major struggles faced by African Americans in the 1930s. The title is derived from a famous poem by Langston Hughes, a poet from the Harlem Renaissance.

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

Leeming offers an intimate portrayal of the author, who was one of his personal friends. This authorized biography discusses Baldwin's struggles, including the racial injustice he witnessed, his attempts to come to terms with his homosexuality, and his religious experiences. Leeming also offers insights into Baldwin's works.

Miller, D. Quentin, ed., *Re-Viewing James Baldwin: Things Not Seen,* Temple University Press, 2000.

Throughout his career, most of Baldwin's critics praised only a handful of the author's works, and they either criticized or ignored the others. In this new collection of essays, several critics discuss these other works and collectively offer a new assessment of Baldwin, whose popularity with many critics has diminished since his death.

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David Galens

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Product Design
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Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
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Or you can visit our Internet site at
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535