

Soul on Ice Study Guide

Soul on Ice by Eldridge Cleaver

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Plot Summary

Eldridge Cleaver was imprisoned at least twice. By his own admission, he was in possession of "a shopping bag" full of marijuana resulting in his first prison sentence and committed a series of rapes resulting in the second. Cleaver is a complex man and the book is his path toward self-discovery. The book is Cleaver's account of a series of actions leading up to and during the American Civil Rights movement. Cleaver also discusses at length the complicated interactions of the social classes, races and genders, focusing on blacks and whites, men and women, the "haves" and the "have nots."

The story begins and ends in Folsom Prison, includes a series of short vignettes and personal correspondence between Cleaver and Beverly Axlerod, and attorney for whom Cleaver confesses a physical attraction. Cleaver talks extensively of his own need for fulfillment and what it takes to attain that. He is haunted by his own desire for white women and ashamed of his lack of desire for black women. He explores the reasons for those social taboos against that desire and the reasons they exist. According to Cleaver, black men have been forced by society to become the brute force performing all the menial tasks necessary for daily life. White men have become the "mind" of the nation, making the important decisions and overseeing the black man. By sheer necessity, those white men have become weaker physically, almost effeminate. The white women must then become more feminine to make up for the effeminate nature of their men, all the while desiring the brute strength of the black man. The black woman is in a similar position, forced to become strong to perform the many domestic skills necessary for whites to be comfortable. That very strength becomes the thing that puts the black man off, forcing the black man's attention on that desirable feminine woman - the white woman who is ultimately unattainable to the black man.

The complex relationships are made more so by the addition of the social classes, the desire of white men to become more physical and the desire of black men to become mentally stronger. Cleaver looks at the details of those interactions with a critical eye, often accepting blame for his own shortcomings but more often putting the fault squarely on the shoulders of those who oppressed the black man for centuries.



Letters from Prison, On Becoming

Letters from Prison, On Becoming Summary and Analysis

Eldridge Cleaver was eighteen-years-old in 1954 when the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed segregation. On June 18 of that year, he began a sentence in Folsom Prison for possession of marijuana. Cleaver says it was an important year for him in many ways. Not only did he begin the prison sentence, he became aware of his position as a "black in white America." Cleaver assures the reader that he's always been aware of the color of his skin, but was suddenly awakened to what it meant. He talks of the social status - or lack thereof - that he hadn't known existed until the mass demonstrations began. He said he and other blacks were suddenly against everything that represented America, right down to hot dogs and baseball.

Cleaver's own opinion is to dismiss the segregationists and calls for the arrest of those who aren't obeying the law to desegregate. He points out that he was arrested for disobeying a law. Cleaver never denies the crimes that landed him in prison, including the fact that he was caught with "a shopping bag full of marijuana." He admits that he was "in love with the weed" but says he never saw the wrong of it. He says that "our group" supports atheism. Though he never defines "our group," the reader is led to believe it's blacks, in general. Cleaver goes into great detail about his infatuation with white women. He calls them "The Ogre." Cleaver tells of the things denied prisoners, including sex. He wanted to establish a system that would provide "salaried women" who would "minister to the needs" of male prisoners. He suggested it could be a reward for good behavior. Cleaver explains that his preoccupation on that point was due largely to his age and his need for sex.

It was during this time that he taped a "pin-up girl" on the wall of his cell. A guard ripped it down, and Cleaver asked why he'd been singled out. The guard told him to select a black woman as a pin-up and that he'd allow the poster to remain. Cleaver maintains that he hadn't realized he'd selected a white woman and that he felt guilty for his subconscious choice. Cleaver has an altercation with a man called Butterfly who insists that he hates black women. He later admits that he too is enamored with white women and called it "a sickness." Cleaver mentions the case of Emmett Till, a black man who was killed for flirting with a white woman. Cleaver admits that he was also attracted to the white woman. Two days after that discovery, Cleaver had a "nervous breakdown" and spent some time in a padded cell. He laments the lack of real help, though he had sessions with psychiatrists. He says those officials refused to talk about what he really wanted to discuss, focusing instead on Cleaver's family life and childhood. Cleaver expands his studies and says he began to believe it was crucial for him to have an antagonistic, ruthless attitude toward white women, leading him to become a rapist. He admits to practicing on black women in areas where violence was rampant and he was unlikely to be caught. Then he expanded to white women. Rather than a sexual release,



he describes the act as an opportunity to defy the white man's laws. He says he felt he was getting revenge for the treatment of black women by white men. He says he believes he would eventually have resorted to murder.

Cleaver admits to being confused about the integration issue but says he thought the entire rest of the world was united on the issue. He says he learned the truth from reading and in that truth learned that he had options - including the choice to act on his own knowledge. The reader will note that Cleaver seems anxious to learn about others, but also about himself. He claims to want to move toward self-discovery and his writing appears to be honest. Cleaver doesn't seem to be writing the book as a way to make money or even to share his feelings and discoveries with others. He began to write as a means toward self-discovery. Cleaver says he wants to get out of prison, but is more concerned with being honest in his writing.



Letters from Prison, Soul on Ice

Letters from Prison, Soul on Ice Summary and Analysis

Cleaver begins the chapter by talking about the impression he makes on people. As a prisoner and convicted rapist, people expect him to be "penitent" and reserved. He says he continually lets people down on that point. Cleaver rather abruptly shifts gears and says that he's in love with his attorney. Cleaver says that he was busted with magazines provided by his lawyer and that he earned time in solitary confinement for the possession. He says that his fellow inmates say he'd been set up, as is the typical attitude about all attorneys. As a rule, the inmates expect to be crossed and believe lawyers are schooled in that art. Cleaver talks of the isolation, that family and friends seldom follow through with regular correspondence and are willing to turn their backs on the inmates. It's acceptable to use a lawyer - to use anyone, for that matter. He says it would be acceptable to claim being in love if it gained the inmate anything, but the inmate would never be able to fool himself into believing it to be true.

Cleaver talks of his attorney's actions against "all evil of our system." He says that's one reason he loves his lawyer, because they stand on the same sides of issues. Then he admits that his lawyer is female and hints that his love goes to a physical level, as well. Cleaver says he dreams of her, carrying on long conversations in his sleep. While he admits that beginning a new relationship is frightening, he says he doesn't believe it must always end "in carnage." He then talks in poetic terms about encounters with women, likening the parting with impending death. He says that's the reason men hang onto the memory of a woman. Cleaver was imprisoned at twenty-two and had been incarcerated for eight years when he met this woman. He says he knew something had been missing but hadn't realized what until he spent time with a female who was interested in his work and who cared about him. The encounter renews him.

Though he doesn't name the attorney with whom he claims to be in love, the book includes letters written to Beverly Axlerod, a San Francisco lawyer with whom Cleaver begins a relationship from prison. As Cleaver pointed out, he doesn't come across as penitent or regretful and it's possible that Axlerod is drawn to him at least partly because of that attitude. Cleaver will later admit that he - perhaps - should feel that he doesn't deserve her, but that he feels he does. This honesty could be considered egotistical, but is actually only a part of Cleaver's basic makeup.



Four Vignettes

Four Vignettes Summary and Analysis

The chapter is divided into five sections, shorter stories on different topics. The first is entitled "Watts" and was written August 16, 1965. Cleaver says there was a stigma associated with being from Watts. He likened it to being a country bumpkin. He says that changed following the riots in the Watts area and that there was suddenly a pride in claiming membership in that community.

The second section is entitled "Eyes" and was written October 28, 1965. Cleaver describes an encounter with a woman on Main Street in L.A. He says he was walking the street around noon on a Saturday when he saw a woman sitting at a shoeshine stand. He said that she suddenly broke into song, directed at him, and sang, "Beautiful, beautiful brown eyes." He says he was suddenly aware that he'd been staring, was completely embarrassed and ran away, losing whatever measure of cool he'd managed to project up to that point. In another encounter, Cleaver was involved in a power struggle among the Muslims of San Quentin. He says a man objected to Cleaver's involvement, alleging that he had "the Mark of the Beast" in his eyes. Another man came to Cleaver's defense, arguing that many blacks had light-colored eyes. Cleaver admits that the altercation left him "bleeding inside."

The third vignette is titled "Soul Food" and was written November 3, 1965. This is a brief observation on the significance of soul food, such as chitterlings. Cleaver says the poorer blacks eat them of necessity and the upper class has made them "a mocking slogan." The fact that the upper class is able to purchase steaks was unpopular with the poorer blacks. Cleaver says he wishes the upper class had to make do with only "soul food."

The next vignette is titled "A Religious Conversion, More or Less" and is written September 10, 1965. In this section, Cleaver says he was involved with the Catholic Church while in prison, because he was required to choose a religion and knew the whites wouldn't tolerate him as a Protestant. He tells of a priest asking if anyone could explain the Trinity. Cleaver volunteers only to have the priest shoot him down, saying that no one could explain the Trinity.

The final and longer vignette is titled "The Christ and His Teachings" and was written September 10, 1965. The "Christ" Cleaver describes is teacher Chris Lovdjeeff. Cleaver admits to not understanding why Lovdjeeff would voluntarily put himself behind bars. He talks of the man's passion for his calling. It was Lovdjeeff who encouraged Cleaver to read Merton and Cleaver describes in detail his rejection of portions of Merton's writings. Lovdjeeff assigned an essay and Cleaver talks of his decision to write about his lack of love for white people. He says Lovdjeeff cried over the essay and refused to grade it.



The essays are the only look into Cleaver's past with any detail. It's interesting to note that Cleaver admits that he ran away from the pretty woman at the shoe stand. Some men would have been so interested in preserving whatever "cool" image they have might not have admitted to the reaction. It's another point for Cleaver that he's willing to write down the memories he believes to be important - not just those that present him in an admirable light. Admissions such as this lend certain credibility to the entire book. The first vignette fits neatly with the coming of age theme of the book. Though Cleaver is aging, has moved from the free world to prison, and is likely becoming more mature, he's still a sensitive person and others have the power to touch him deeply.



A Day in Folsom Prison

A Day in Folsom Prison Summary and Analysis

Cleaver describes in detail his daily routine. While inmates are not required to get up until 7 a.m., Cleaver rises early in order to start his day with an exercise routine. He says he sometimes forgoes the exercise in order to write, but not often. He is then given some hot water and takes what he terms "a bird bath" - a bath for a jailbird. Though Cleaver hasn't addressed the current letter to anyone in particular, he admits that when he sees "your name on the envelope, I let out a big yell." Cleaver is housed on the honor block. Those cells have heavy metal doors and Cleaver says it once bothered him, but later became a safety net. In those cells with only bars, it's possible for another inmate to simply toss in a homemade explosive. As a resident of the honor block, Cleaver has access to radio though only two channels are available. Breakfast begins at 7:30 a.m. and Cleaver goes next to his job in the bakery, unless it's Saturday. He works until noon, has to return to his cell at 3:20 and is counted three times each day. He says he has the option to play cards, watch TV or go outdoors in the afternoon. Cleaver tells of the old men who play marbles on the yard. He said there's an air of defeat about them and that some refer to those who'll grow old in prison as the marble players.

Three nights each week, inmates of the honor block have a free evening. Cleaver is a member of the Inmates Advisory Council and the Gavel Club. Cleaver explains that segregation is alive and well. He says that whites are willing to talk to blacks, but only in specific circumstances. He also talks about the library and the censorship on reading material.

Cleaver says he wants nothing more than to read and write, but must be involved in the "petty intrigue" necessary for survival in prison. He doesn't go into detail about those "petty intrigues," but does talk at different times about the need to belong to a particular group or to avoid the appearance of doing particular things. The fact that he's attained and maintained a cell in the honor block is a testament of his evolving maturity - his coming of age and self-discovery - and his ability to distance himself from troublesome situations. Cleaver talks at length about the prison segregation system. There are already signs of his increasing tolerance. It seems as though Cleaver is learning that tolerance through education - not a formal education but his own reading selections.



A Soul on Ice, Initial Reactions to the Assassination of Malcolm X

A Soul on Ice, Initial Reactions to the Assassination of Malcolm X Summary and Analysis

As is the case with many historical events, Cleaver recalls exactly where he was and what he was doing when he learned of the assassination of Malcolm X. He says that he didn't initially know that the black rights leader had been killed, but was watching a movie at Folsom Prison. He recalls thinking that the shooting, if not too serious, could benefit the movement. He says that he couldn't image that Malcolm X might actually have fallen victim to the shooter. Cleaver says that when he discovered it was true, his overriding desire was for vengeance. He spends the next few days being blasted with information about the death of Malcolm X, but says he continued to reject the facts. In Folsom, the white prisoners have "a leer and a hint of a smile" and seem anxious for war between two prevailing black factions. It's important to understand that Malcolm X, though a Muslim, had broke from the main religion and the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Cleaver himself says that he looked for fault in Malcolm's teachings but found none and opted to follow that faction. Cleaver became a staunch supporter of Malcolm X and an important figure in the Folsom Prison Muslims. Prison officials tried to quash the organization, but it continued to exist. Cleaver says a few Muslims who were loyal to Elijah saw Malcolm's death as the will of Allah. Those saw the opportunity to reunite the Muslim community. Cleaver points out the significance of the assassination and the implications for the future of the civil unrest. Cleaver talks extensively about the magnetism of Malcolm X. He says it had little to do with the man's teachings and more to do with the fact that he spoke eloquently of the aspirations of the black man. Cleaver believes blacks would have followed him, regardless of the religion. It's important to note that Cleaver talks about Malcolm's own denunciation of racism - a racism preached by Elijah himself. Cleaver says that the assassins have hastened Malcolm's campaign.

Cleaver ends the chapter by vowing that the black man will "have our manhood." This idea is often repeated throughout the book. Cleaver will later talk at length about the reasons black men are accepted only on particular fronts - as athletes, for example. Cleaver touts himself as being a follower of Malcolm X before it was a widely accepted stand. It seems that, even at that point, Cleaver was leaning toward tolerance rather than outright, total racial bias. Cleaver doesn't dwell on the subject of the Muslim movement in prison, but he does say that he was a member when the prison officials tried to eliminate the organization.

Though Cleaver isn't explicit about the reasons, he says that he was sometimes in trouble and faced time in solitary confinement. The fact that he goes from solitary confinement to a cell on the honor block (and perhaps back, though the reader isn't told), and that Cleaver is willing to stand up for what he believes in is a look at the

human side of this man. There's little evidence of the changes that being a Muslim wrought in Cleaver's life. The fact that Cleaver later denounced his standing in the Muslim organization could be a clue that the acceptance was nothing more than "jailhouse religion."



Blood of the Beast, The White Race and Its Heroes

Blood of the Beast, The White Race and Its Heroes Summary and Analysis

Cleaver begins the chapter by explaining that he is not, nor has he ever been, white. He then says that he's also not a black Muslim, though he once held that claim. He says that he is an "Ofay Watcher." This is one of the many references Cleaver makes to a literary work of the day and that he likely expects the reader to simply understand. If the reader isn't familiar with the term, he is ultimately left to discover the meaning on his own. Cleaver goes on to say that his characterization of himself as an Ofay Watcher may bother the reader, but that it was necessary. Cleaver says it was also a difficult thing for him himself, because he has recently held the opinion that the entire white race is evil. Cleaver says that he's "washed his hands in the blood of the martyr, Malcolm X," and that he's renounced the racist teachings of Elijah Muhammad. Cleaver says he has begun using some alternative words in an effort to be less controversial, and has stopped referring to the white man as "beast, reverting instead to "imperialist" or "colonialist."

Cleaver returns to his references of the ofays, saying that some want to get as far as possible from the ofays while others want to break their power. Cleaver warns that the many changes could be mistaken for permanent change rather than reactions to the social upheaval of the day. There have always been differences of opinion among the generations and the approach of younger blacks and their elders to the quest for equality is no different, Cleaver says. He believes that the elderly Negro leaders were once in control of the younger generation and that the whites expected them to remain in control. Some gave in, removed themselves and watched. Others - those Cleaver says was on "a tighter leash by the whites" - were promptly ousted by the protesters.

Cleaver blames it all on the loss of white heroes. Suddenly, the younger whites who had held cowboys in such high regard were ashamed of those men, because they'd slaughtered Indians. While the blacks are demanding equality, the white youth are undergoing a dramatic change as they abandon their classic heroes and realize the atrocities of their race. Cleaver says many whites have taken a second look at themselves as the "Master Race." That doesn't mean that white youth are suddenly in support of black equality. Cleaver says there's a "gulf" of fear and misunderstanding separating the two, but that the white youth began by accepting that their "heroes" were wrong in their treatment of minorities.

Cleaver divides the steps of the white youth rebellion into four stages. They are an initial recoiling and rejection of conformity expected of youth; an active search for their own role in change; joining of Negro demonstrations; and the use of techniques honed by Negroes to attack everyday problems. Cleaver points to several fads as evidence that



white youth were ready to rebel, including the styles of the Beatniks. He says older whites saw it as youth who were wearing long hair and refusing to take regular baths. According to Cleaver, the older generation completely missed the point - which these youth were yelling out against atrocities of the minorities (both in America and on foreign soil). Cleaver says the youth then began to look with longing at the Negro revolution, but weren't yet certain of the role they could play, and so tended to watch from a distance. As the whites began actually joining the blacks, the revolution took on new meaning.

Cleaver points to the fact of whites being attacked along with blacks, and that it was a positive point for the black movement. Cleaver refers to the Battle of Selma and the anger blacks felt toward Martin Luther King, because he turned the people away from a riot that could have brought more attention to the issue. The inclusion of whites into the civil rights movement expanded to other facets of society - the Free Speech Movement that began at Berkeley, California, for example. Protests against Vietnam, Cuba and U.S. aid to South Africa followed. While all the protesting was going on, the older whites saw only the younger white generation's love of dance, marijuana and long hair as rebellion, Cleaver says.

He then turns his attention to freed slave and statesman Fredrick Douglas, writer Harriet Beecher Stowe and others who presented Americans with a look at the darker side of America. Cleaver said whites have simply been unable to reconcile themselves to that view. The blacks' quest for equal rights forced whites to look more closely, a move met with hostility.

Cleaver takes a historical look at the roles of whites and blacks. The whites administered the plantations while the blacks were the "field niggers" that did the manual labor. Cleaver refers to "separate-but-equal" as the "last stage of the white man's flight into cultural neurosis and the beginning of the black man's frantic striving to assert his humanity and equalize his position with the whites." As blacks gained entrance to more aspects of American life, whites sought other ways to maintain their superiority. He points out the influence of black music as an example. Whites allowed that influence and accepted the music but continued to refer to the similar music played by blacks as "Negro music."

Cleaver says that the young whites accept the past and are ready to move into the future. He says that they know blacks don't want revenge, therefore aren't afraid. Cleaver expresses hope for tomorrow and uses himself, Malcolm X and all those willing to change as a reason for that hope. His take on the era is not typical. Most older people saw the long hair, radical music and drug use as rebellion against their elders. Most younger people saw it as a chance to rebel. It's likely that many didn't know why there was a rebellion, other than it's what children do as they're trying to stretch their wings. Put all that on stage with the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam Conflict, and it's difficult to reconcile the fact that they're all interwoven. Cleaver often examines the connection between particular things, people and events, and these are no exception. The fact that it's a convoluted connection could be taken as simply another testament of the complexity of the issues.



Blood of the Beast, Lazarus, Come Forth

Blood of the Beast, Lazarus, Come Forth Summary and Analysis

Cleaver talks about the need for spectator sports - from boxing to Little League. However, he says those sports have become "pagan rituals." According to Cleaver, people deny their true need for sports - a desire for the sight of blood. While it's arguable that those interested in Little League aren't there with the hope of seeing a child actually bleed, Cleaver is likely talking about the human need to see one triumph over another. He says the lengths people will go to in order to conceal and deny this need is matched by only one thing - the "Victorian hysteria" regarding sex. The support of those sporting events can be traced back to the Roman gladiators when crowds gathered to watch hapless victims being devoured by lions.

In Cleaver's world, there were some who admitted they wanted to watch the carnage of the boxing ring, but all were captivated from the moment the fight began. Cleaver then talks of the dimming of lines between black and white in the sports arena. Cleaver explains his opinion on constant lack of black leadership. He says that each time a promising black leader arrives on the scene, he's immediately faced with negative publicity, assassination or exile. He discusses Paul Robeson, a singer and actor making \$200,000 annually who spoke out for black rights. Robeson was blackballed from the acting community, effectively silencing him and ending his career.

Some might point out that blacks often excel in sports and remain successful throughout their careers. Cleaver has an explanation. He says that the whites in power allow those figures to become and remain popular, because they fit the image of the physically strong (but otherwise ineffectual) black man. Cleaver says that President John F. Kennedy called a group of black celebrities together, hoping they'd help "cool off" the actions of those participating in demonstrations. Cleaver says they refused, because they all realized what that would do to their standing in the black community. Against this backdrop, Muhammad Ali met Floyd Patterson in the heavyweight-boxing ring. Cleaver said whites favored Patterson, because whites wanted Ali silenced. Blacks seemed to view Patterson as an "Uncle Tom," a black willing to do whatever whites demanded. Cleaver points out that whites were willing to support a black champion, because there wasn't a white alternative.

Cleaver calls Ali the first black champion who was not controlled by whites. The fact that Ali's win caused uproar indicates that there was more at stake than a boxing title, according to Cleaver. He talks of the need for white men to be able to identify with the winners, and says that Ali was an "ideological" black man. The problem was that Ali threatened the whites but also the blacks who had allowed themselves to be controlled by whites. Cleaver then turns his text to a discussion of Lazarus. He talks of the New Testament parable in which Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead and explained that it is interpreted by black Muslims to mean that the Negro will be raised from slavery to



equality. Ali was born Cassius Clay and took on the name and ideals of the Muslims. Cleaver says that Ali was a strong Muslim, willing to fight for the white man's entertainment but refusing to be controlled. Cleaver predicts that the rise of the black man will be a rebuilding that will affect everyone.

Cleaver says that the only blacks allowed to excel are those who exhibit the traits whites deem necessary - sportsmanlike conduct and "harmonious race relations." In other words, those who don't rock the racial boat are allowed to prosper while others are subjected to what Cleaver calls "Negro control." He says the action is ultimately effective. Cleaver backs this up by pointing out that the great black minds were seldom quoted while black entertainers and sports figures became increasingly popular and accepted. Cleaver's total belief that blacks are controlled is evident. He talks early about his lack of understanding - that he didn't know he was being treated unfairly, but it bothered him greatly once he knew.

Now, Cleaver says he believes that Kennedy asked famous black people to stop the violence. The reader must wonder whether those blacks would have taken that action prior to the Civil Rights era when it became evident that blacks did have power. Cleaver notes that rebuilding the country, society and the place blacks have in the world will affect all races. The reader can wonder whether Cleaver foresaw the long-term problems that would face those trying to rebuild.



Blood of the Beast, Notes on a Native Son

Blood of the Beast, Notes on a Native Son Summary and Analysis

Cleaver says that he was a huge fan of writer James Baldwin. He discusses the author's point of view, including the fact that few are truly liberated - an achievement Baldwin calls revenge. However, Cleaver's impression of Baldwin slowly begins to change and it's not until he reads "Another Country" that he discovers Baldwin's attack on another writer - Norman Mailer - who wrote "The White Negro." Baldwin's writing, according to Cleaver, expresses a hatred for blacks, including him. Baldwin writes a scalding essay that ridiculed the vision of black artists. In his work, "Note on a Native Son," Baldwin explains that he was denied his African heritage as a child, therefore embraced the white. Cleaver says that attitude explains why Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad could conceive "Yacub's History."

The myth goes that some 6,300 years ago, all people were black. Then a "mad scientist" came up with a plan to eliminate blacks through selective breeding. Two dark black people were denied the right to marry, ensuring that lighter skin was irrevocably prevalent in the next generation. The process continued until no true blacks remained, eventually leading to the red man, then the yellow, then white. Cleaver calls the myth "an inversion of the racial death-wish of American Negroes." He says that even many blacks hate the idea of dark-skinned people having children. According to Cleaver, Negroes are perpetuating that myth-prophecy by surgically thinning their lips, bleaching their skin and mating with whites.

Cleaver compares those who seek out white approval by becoming more like the whites with the "Uncle Toms." He says the Uncle Toms were at least only trying to survive while the former are seeking to redefine themselves to please the white man. Cleaver says he's not interested in denying Baldwin his due, and that the nation owes him for his literary works. Cleaver then turns to a discussion of a book written by Richard Wright. In the book, blacks were "punk-hunting." He explains that "punk-hunting" is a term used to describe blacks searching for homosexuals. He says the blacks will beat the homosexuals in what appears to be an effort to inflict pain on a social outcast. Cleaver likens it to the lynching of blacks in the South. Cleaver describes freedom rider Rufus Scott as "a black eunuch who has completely submitted to the white man." He says Scott indulged in the "white man's pastime of committing suicide."

Cleaver talks of the quest for equality as a power struggle that becomes evident in the demonstrations but also in relationships between blacks and whites. Those relationships cover the students who are holding sit-ins, but also encompass an entire world of change. Cleaver goes on to discuss the relationship between Baldwin and Wright to some degree, adding his own opinion that Wright held the correct point of view

with his political, social and economic references. Cleaver says Baldwin's essays revealed that he hated Wright's masculinity. Cleaver ends the chapter with a quote from Mailer, "There's a shit-storm coming." The fact that he uses that phrase could be an indication that he too, expects a "shit storm."



Blood of the Beast, Rallying Round the Flag

Blood of the Beast, Rallying Round the Flag Summary and Analysis

Cleaver talks of the American tendency to run to the aid of anyone. He says that Americans "think of themselves collectively as a huge rescue squad on twenty-four-hour call to any spot on the globe where dispute and conflict may erupt." As he talks about the United State's presence in Vietnam, Cleaver indicates his belief that the government is misleading people in order to gain support for the war. He says that the government talks of the communists in North Vietnam invading the peace-loving democratic South. Cleary says the conflict is actually a civil war, but that the government can't characterize it as such, because the American people wouldn't support interference in that situation. Cleary says the reason President Lyndon Johnson opposes the sit-ins and teach-ins of the day are because he fears the truth will become public knowledge and that the public will believe it. Cleaver discusses at length the changes in America because of the racial uprising. He says that there is a "new right" and a "new left," and that they are both the result of the Negro revolution. The new right is faced with the task of breaking up the consensus over the civil rights struggle. The new left is to hold that consensus together. He says one aspect of the struggle has been resolved - the black man is here to stay.

It's interesting to note that many people some half-century after the writing of *Soul on Ice* agree with Cleaver's opinion of the United States as a country that is over-eager to hand out charity to anyone. Others continue to hold the opinion of governmental cover-ups and misdirection, whenever it suits the government's purpose. Cleaver says the world is watching the struggle in America to see what will happen and that there's an undeniable link between the struggle in America and America's involvement with conflicts around the world.



Blood of the Beast, The Black Man's Stake in Vietnam

Blood of the Beast, The Black Man's Stake in Vietnam Summary and Analysis

Cleaver opens the chapter by saying that there's a correlation between the Negro revolution and the war in Vietnam. He supports this claim by pointing out that sixteen percent of troops sent to Vietnam were black and that some people view that as an attempt to kill off some of the nation's youngest and brightest black men. Cleaver says that blacks have traditionally been easily won over by a few "liberal sounding" laws that have no hope of being enforced. He says that the only guarantee for black security is for the American blacks to join with minorities from around the world.

Cleaver says there have been periods of attention to black rights before. The difference of the 1960s is the sheer number of people aware of and involved with the issues. Cleaver says even the "smallest man on the streets" is involved. Cleaver further ties the success of the Negro revolution to a "free and independent Vietnam." Cleaver believes the only chance for black freedom and equality is a single organization speaking out for those causes. Cleaver talks about Malcolm X and his visionary request for "human rights," rather than "civil rights." Cleaver sees the war in Vietnam as a temporary reprieve for blacks. He says that politicians have their hands full fighting and are willing to take some steps to pacify the Americans calling for equal rights for blacks.

Cleaver sees a connection between the genocide in Vietnam and the apparent approval being handed out to blacks in America and believes it doesn't bode well for the Negro revolution in America, once the war is over. Cleaver says the revolution currently underway differs from previous efforts to install equal rights, because every black person is aware and is involved.

He seems to believe that all blacks believe that this is their last chance. It's interesting to note that he also believes that radical changes take time, that blacks can't afford to wait, but that they also can't afford to push too quickly. He doesn't really explain that thinking. While Cleaver claims there's strength in the number of black Americans, he cites disorganization and says they'll never achieve equality on their own. Cleaver sees the call for human rights as a positive step in that direction, because it prompted a conference between American blacks and Africans.

Cleaver warns that blacks have worldwide support for their movement, but warn that following the wrong leaders could damage that. While he doesn't go into depth on that topic, Cleaver himself said that he carefully studied the teachings of Malcolm X before deciding to follow him. Nevertheless, even with that amount of cautious thought, Cleaver at one point admits that people would have followed Malcolm X no matter what he was peddling.



Blood of the Beast, Domestic Law and International Order

Blood of the Beast, Domestic Law and International Order Summary and Analysis

Cleaver talks about the fact that there are some twenty million blacks in America. He admits that the blacks are aware of the number and realize the potential for leverage to attain equal rights. The problem continues to be unity. Cleaver describes the flare-up in Watts. He says the problem was not new, but simply a repeat of old arguments that got out of hand. He also describes the way it affected the blacks. He says many black men looked at their guns and wished for the impulse to run out and use them. Black women lost respect for the men who didn't take action.

Meanwhile, the anger of the blacks was directed at the police - a mistake, because Cleaver says the police are merely acting out orders. Cleaver talks about the need for police and military. He says the police and military of any particular order act on their commands and training. For example, communist governments have police and a system of law designed to defend property. Cleaver points out that some people believe there will eventually be a Utopia - a place without the need for police, military or laws, because people live in unity. He says the world today is nowhere near that point.

Cleaver believes himself to be ultimately fair in his assessment of the riots in Watts. He speaks of the blacks' actions and reactions but points out that they're rebelling against the police - a mistake, according to Cleaver. He says the orders are coming from a higher power and that police are merely acting on orders. The lack of unity is discussed again, a common topic for Cleaver. He points out that blacks realize that twenty million people should be a formidable force, but that they lack the ability to come together to make the most of those numbers.

Cleaver goes again to his discussion of how black men can easily lose the respect of their women. He says that black women need to see strength in their men and that any sign of weakness is considered a serious deficiency. Black men seem to see themselves in that same light, and Cleaver says many wished they had the nerve to pick up their guns. He completely omits his own thoughts on the riots in Watts, which could in and of itself be a statement. The reader is left to wonder whether Cleaver would have picked up his gun and joined the fight or been one of the many who wished he could. Cleaver is focusing on the larger picture, making it clear that he believes the blacks should not be focusing their rage on the police. It comes back, according to Cleaver, to disorganization among the black community.



Prelude to Love - Three Letters

Prelude to Love - Three Letters Summary and Analysis

The section consists of correspondence between Cleaver and a San Francisco attorney, Beverly Axlerod. The first letter is from Cleaver. He begins his Sept. 10, 1965, letter by saying that his meeting with Axlerod left him breathless, unable to think and with a desire to write "predictable and trite" sentences. He says that he's lost his sense of self and intimates that Axlerod has revived that. Then, abruptly, he changes the tone of his letter, admitting that he's said all those things as a sham to "sucker my fellow man in and seduce him of his trust." He says that he's vain and has considered running for president. Cleaver says he had the perfect slogan, "Put a black finger on the nuclear trigger," but says that won't work after the riots at Watts.

In Axlerod's return letter dated five days later, she says that she has feelings for him as well. Axlerod says that she realizes the possibility that Cleaver has little contact with the outside world and that his flirtation might be based on the lack of female contact, or that it might simply be a game. She insists that she doesn't care. Cleaver's response is dated five days later. Cleaver admits that he believes he deserves the relationship he feels is about to blossom between the two. Cleaver touches on the fact that their relationship will eventually be forced to grow, because he won't always be in prison. He assures Axlerod that he's sincere and searching for a lasting relationship. Cleaver says his presidential slogan; "Put a black finger on the nuclear trigger" would have been successful because of the black man's patience as he waited for civil rights to become a reality. His indication that Watts had killed that hope indicates his deep belief that the Watts riots had not been a positive move for the Negro revolution.

Axlerod's reply is necessarily vague as she admits that the correspondence will be read and censored. She says she doesn't know where their relationship might lead, but indicates her willingness to find out. In his own reply, Cleaver talks about the depth of his feelings for her and assures her it's never happened before. For example, he says that he'd commonly referred to women as "bitch." He says that the one time he did so about her, he was immediately ashamed. To understand the full impact of Cleaver's statement, the reader must remember his own youth, his rough past and that he's expressed little more than contempt for any woman to this point.

While there is no "conclusion" to these letters - no revelation that the two did begin a relationship or that it fell through, the reader has a clue. Cleaver offers up a dedication at the beginning of his book. It reads, "To Beverly, with whom I share the ultimate of love." The reader is left to make of it what he will. In these letters, Cleaver reveals something of himself. He's already said that people find him lacking, because he doesn't seem penitent and sorry for his actions.

Cleaver admits that he believes he is entitled to love, and that he deserves to find happiness in a relationship. The fact that Axlerod is an attorney of apparent good



standing while Cleaver is incarcerated doesn't seem to be something Cleaver considers insurmountable. It's important to realize that the three letters are only three of what was likely a long correspondence. Why Cleaver selected those three or why he didn't include others is again up to the reader to weigh.



White Woman, Black Man, The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs

White Woman, Black Man, The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs Summary and Analysis

Cleaver devotes the entire chapter to an exchange with an elderly, fat black man. At the beginning, Cleaver and two other inmates are seated at a table. The man approaches and the inmates immediately dub him, "Lazarus." Cleaver says the three younger men believe this older man to be one who has sold out to the white man's demands on black people and are immediately against the man for this reason. They begin their abuse, asking the old man why he hasn't put his life down for the cause and saying that they could at least look to a person who had given his life as someone to be admired.

The man seems confused for a moment, but quickly begins a long monologue of defense. Among his points, he talks about the convoluted interaction between blacks and whites, men and women. He says white men are allowed access to both black and white women, and have throughout the ages. However, black men have been denied white women. He says that's given black women more power than black men have, because they have access to both. He points out that black men are applauded if they excel at sports, because black men are supposed to be the strong, menial slave. He says it's that same principal that governs the black/white relationships. He talks about a relationship of his own, that a black girlfriend had continually picked fights that he couldn't avoid. Those ended with his violence against the woman.

Finally, he claims to have had enough, gave her an open pocketknife, forced her to sit on the couch while he went to sleep with his head in her lap. He says the relationship became docile after that, until he was stopped by a traffic cop. He more or less pleaded to be let off without a ticket and said, "yes sir" a number of times. He said at that point the relationship went back to the way it was before the knife incident. He also speaks of a childhood friend who had been put in a mental hospital. The man visited his friend with a promise to return, but knew he never would. The friend killed himself by bashing his head against a wall. Cleaver's friend accused the man of wrongdoing, but the man denied it.

Cleaver's reference to the men with whom he is imprisoned as "eunuchs" is likely a reference to their incarceration and lack of female companionship but also probably has a larger implication. He speaks of the emasculation of black men, referring to the need for specific actions to make them true men. This is borne out by the tirade of "The Accused," also referred to as "Lazarus," who says black women need a strong man, one who's willing to resort to violence. The "Accused" talks extensively about the relationship between blacks and whites and the reason blacks are accepted as sports figures. It's important to note that Cleaver devotes the entire chapter to this man's views on the subject. He claims to have never come across the man again, but commits the

man's tirade to memory, then includes it in his writing. Cleaver never expresses an opinion as to whether the man is correct in his assumptions.



White Woman, Black Man, The Primeval Mitosis

White Woman, Black Man, The Primeval Mitosis Summary and Analysis

Cleaver begins the chapter with his version of the beginning of humankind, including the establishment of the sexes. He suggests that the forerunner of humans climbed from the primordial ooze and split into male and female, and that the two sexes have always sought to reunite. He calls this the "Primeval Urge" and says it sets the basis for heterosexuality. Cleaver contends that society decides what the ultimate form of masculine and feminine beauty is to be, and that most people are driven to attain that in themselves. Cleaver then begins a discussion of the societal classes that govern. He refers to the leader as the "Godhead" and says that could be the president, dictator, king or chairman. He calls those with delegated power below the Godhead "Omnipotent Administrators."

Cleaver says the remainder of society has no power and tends to measure their alienation in terms of their distance from the Godhead. In fact, he contends that their alienation is actually measured in the distance from that "perfect" form of beauty. Cleaver says those men in power react negatively to increasing numbers of themselves. Cleaver makes a historical reference, saying that the nobility of ages ago tended to be weak and effeminate in contrast to the peasants who were physically strong. He says that the upper class women of today are expected to be particularly feminine to offset the effeminate nature of their men, and that the lower class women become, in comparison, less feminine.

Cleaver seems to use the complex relationships between men and women of the various classes to explain why white women seek out men who are beneath them socially - hence, black men. He says that the upper class of white men is - by standard - physically weaker. They have foregone physical strength for mental. Therefore, the woman finds only physical exhaustion, but not sexual satisfaction, in his bed. Cleaver says that women may never have a physical encounter with a man of the lower station, but is "fully convinced that he can fulfill her physical need." By contrast, the men of that lower level believe they have been "robbed of his mind." Cleaver says the mental offerings - including ideas - of the black man are simply ignored as worthless. Cleaver explains that this is the reason men of that lower social order - the black man, in this case - idolizes the women of the upper (white) class while despising the strong women of his own.

Meanwhile, the women of that lower order are faced with the icon of feminine beauty that she can never attain. She is also able to see the upper class of men and could choose that over those in her own class. However, she is likely to see her own man as weak, because he is subservient to the upper class. Cleaver completes the intricate



description of these relationships by admitting that all are envious of the other but are also likely to be repulsed. Cleaver says that the two classes are not necessarily exclusive, unless there are races to make it so.

In a society without racial differences, a person could feasibly move through the ranks of the classes, though it's unlikely that such a society could actually exist. Cleaver says it is more important that a person in that situation could imagine it to be so. In the case of blacks and whites, the only way for a black man to rise to the social level reserved for whites is to undergo a biological change.

Cleaver's observations on humans, their interactions and social positions, are a something of a convoluted spiral. The complexity of his argument is somewhat difficult to grasp as an entire concept, though it makes sense taken in pieces. For example, his discussion on the relationship of men and women, black and white, and the upper and lower social classes in "The Primeval Mitosis" contains a myriad of points. He says that the icon of beauty is determined by a particular society, and that people become enamored of the highest attainable "beauty" in that society. However, he goes to great length to disparage those who are at the top of the societal bracket, insisting that men in that position are overly effeminate and insecure in their manhood. While the overall picture is undeniably believable from Cleaver's point of view, it may be somewhat difficult for the average reader to grasp.



White Woman, Black Man, Convalescence

White Woman, Black Man, Convalescence Summary and Analysis

Cleaver attributes a major step toward bridging the racial gap to several events - John F. Kennedy's election to the presidency, the introduction of the Twist, changing music and musicians including Elvis Presley and The Beatles. Cleaver says the two races have been divided by an imaginary line and that the blacks have traditionally been the ones to attempt to bridge that gap.

In this case, the whites are invading. For some, it could be ironic that the hula-hoop and the Twist are the catalysts for the change. Cleaver attributes it to a dormant desire of those in the upper class (which he calls the Mind) to be more physical. The Twist and the hula-hoop provide a socially acceptable opportunity for those upper class people to be more physical - even in public.

Cleaver speaks of Kennedy only briefly, noting that the assassin who killed the young president may have been aiming at silencing a man but actually created a "larger-than-life" hero. Cleaver says the awakening was not only important for the whites, but reminded the blacks "I've got a mind of my own." His writing includes several comments on that topic, including some Negroes who made fun at the efforts of the white dancers.

Cleaver entitles this chapter "convalescence" in an apparent effort to prepare the reader for what he considers the first major step in bridging the gap toward equality for blacks. Cleaver touches on several historically important events. Rosa Parks's resistance, as Cleaver terms it, sparks a contact between whites and blacks, as do the conflict in Little Rock (Arkansas) and the newly freed nations who "paraded" through the UN. It's interesting to note that Cleaver speaks of the crossing of that imaginary line between the races from both points of view. He admits that it's typically been blacks who attempted crossing the racial and that not all blacks were tolerant of the whites who wanted to join in with the music and dance that was sweeping the nation.



White Woman, Black Man, To All Black Women, from All Black Men

White Woman, Black Man, To All Black Women, from All Black Men Summary and Analysis

Cleaver addresses his final chapter to all black women. He says that he heard his woman scream out, and did nothing to help her. He says that he embraced violence and was willing to kill another black man or a black woman, but would pick cotton all day for a white master. He says that he was willing to accept his lot in life, and that he seldom died of old age. He touches on caution versus cowardice, but stops short of calling black men cowards. He ends the chapter and the book by saying that the blacks had always expected that they would climb from slavery and oppression into "a cool, green and peaceful, sunlit place," but that it was "a wild and savage wilderness" filled with ruins. Cleaver ends with a challenge to the black woman, to "put on your crown, my Queen, and we will build a New City" on these ruins."

It seems to be an apology for his lack of power over the past four hundred years of slavery. Throughout the chapter, Cleaver inserts the word "I" for all black men, putting himself in the place of all those who went before. The chapter could be considered a brief summary of the history of the blacks, including slavery. While Cleaver apologizes to the black women who were enslaved and mistreated, he doesn't address the fact that black men were subjected to the same treatment. Cleaver seems to exhibit some of the same qualities he's discussed throughout the book - of black men who wanted to be strong and were expected to be strong, but who had weaknesses nonetheless.



Characters

Eldridge Cleaver

Eldridge Cleaver was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1935. He was convicted of drug possession for what he terms "a shopping bag full of marijuana." He was later convicted for rape. He offers few details of his crimes in the book, other than to admit the guilt. Cleaver is incarcerated in three prisons and writes the manuscript for "Soul on Ice" from Folsom Prison in California. The writing, he says, is a search for self-discovery and an effort to help himself where the system failed. Cleaver's character is the only major character in the book. He writes from his prison cell and offers a look at himself, his life in prison, his views on the racial tensions in America and abroad, and his opinions of others. One of the important aspects of Cleaver is that he overcame one of the biggest hurdles facing many young black men who find themselves in prison - education. Cleaver is an avid reader and makes extensive references to the writers he most loves and most hates.

Cleaver becomes active in some aspects of prison life, serving as a board member on the inmates' advisory council and meeting with other groups. However, he admits that he'd love nothing more than to spend his time reading and writing. There are only hints and brief glances of his life before prison so it's impossible to determine what he was like before his incarceration. Likewise, a brief look at letters between Cleaver and his attorney Beverly Axlerod are the only hint he offers of his life after prison. He does, however, dedicate the book to Beverly, speaking of their "ultimate love."

Though the look into Cleaver's life is limited, the look at his views on the relationships between blacks and whites, men and women and social classes is extensive. Cleaver admits that he admires and is physically attracted to white women, and that he despises himself for that. He goes through an extensive self-analysis to determine the root of that fact and to confront that aspect of his life. He becomes a Muslim, but denounces the main branch and follows Malcolm X who preaches tolerance of the white race. He later says that he's no longer a Muslim, though gives little insight into the reason.

Beverly Axlerod

Axlerod is a San Francisco attorney who first met Cleaver for advice on legal matters while he was housed in Folsom Prison. In September 1965, the two began communicating on a personal level and expressed their desire for a long-term relationship together. Cleaver first mentions that he's attracted to an attorney without mentioning her name. He expresses that he's incredibly taken with her, but the reader doesn't get details until the letters between the two.



Butterfly

Butterfly is a fellow black inmate who denied liking white women when asked, saying his grandmother was white, and he even hated her. Later, he said it wasn't true. He became a Muslim and married a black girl.

Emmett Till

Till is a black man who was murdered for allegedly flirting with a white woman. Eldridge confides that he feels contempt for himself as he was also attracted to that white woman.

Chris Lovdjieff

Lovdjieff is a teacher and preacher in the prison. Eldridge describes his dedication in somewhat derisive tones, and says he doesn't understand why someone would voluntarily put themselves inside the prison walls.

Elijah Muhammad

Muhammad is a Muslim leader who preached Black supremacy. Muslims believed Elijah Muhammad was to raise the Black man from the pit of slavery just as Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead.

Malcolm X

Malcolm X is a Muslim leader who led a group that split from the leadership of Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. He preached the possibility of blacks and whites living and worshiping together.

Marcus Garvey

Garvey is the leader of a black movement that began in American, he was incarcerated and later exiled to England.

W.E.B. DuBois

Cleaver calls DuBois "one of the intellectual giants of the modern world." He was arrested on what Cleaver calls "trumped up" charges but was not convicted. He moved to Ghana, Africa, denounced his American citizenship and spoke out for communism.



Paul Robeson

Robeson is a singer and actor who spoke out for black rights. Cleaver says Robeson was the victim of a character assassination that put him out of the acting business, leaving him financially broke and emotionally heartbroken.

Muhammad Ali

Ali is a boxer who won over Floyd Patterson in the heavyweight ring. Cleaver says Ali is a threat to white America as he refused to be manipulated. Many Blacks supported Ali, because he was the "lesser of two evils," according to Cleaver.

Floyd Patterson

Patterson is the boxer who met Ali in the ring. Patterson, a black man, was supported by white America because they believed he could be controlled. Cleaver notes that a cross was burned on Patterson's yard when he tried to move into a white neighborhood.

James Baldwin

Baldwin is a black American writer. Cleaver says that he's initially a Baldwin fan, but later finds that he disapproves of the writer because of his views on Blacks, African culture and the white community. Baldwin's writing indicated that he'd accepted white teaching because his own African culture was not available to him. Cleaver says Baldwin lacks the ability to see beyond the skin of people.

The Accused (From The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs)

The Accused is an elderly man who is never called by name. Cleaver and two of his prison mates verbally attack the man based solely on his appearance and what that means to them. The man launches into a tirade about the fate of American blacks, the circumstances that brought the culture to this point and the reasons more bloodshed won't solve the problem.

Martin Luther King Jr.

King, Jr. is a civil rights activist.



John F. Kennedy

Kennedy is a president and civil rights supporter.

The Beatles

The Beatles are a band that Cleaver called "the middlemen" between blacks and whites.



Objects/Places

Folsom Prison appears in non-fiction

Located in Represa, California, Folsom Prison was "home" to Cleaver for many years. It was from this prison that he wrote letters to attorney Beverly Axlerod.

Watts appears in non-fiction

Watts is an area of Los Angeles known to be a slum area, or "ghetto," largely populated by minorities. Cleaver speaks of Watts as a place to have escaped. As is often the case, being from Watts carried a negative connotation, but Cleaver explained that it became a badge of honor worn by those prisoners who had come from that area. Watts was the site of race riots that resulted in the burning of many buildings.

The Folsom Theatre appears in non-fiction

Mess Hall Number One in Folsom Prison, Folsom Theatre is known as such because of movies shown there on Sundays in 1965 when Cleaver was a prisoner.

Folsom's Honor Unit appears in non-fiction

Unit Number 5 in the Folsom Prison, Honor Unit held for those offenders who had clean records for at least six months. Those prisoners got specific advantages, including additional television time, larger cells and less custodial supervision.

Yacub's History appears in non-fiction

Yacub's History is a myth about the beginning of the white race. As the story goes, there was once only Black people. A "mad scientist" of the day began a program of selective breeding, and no two people with dark black skin were allowed to marry. By doing so, the skin tones were eventually lightened until no true Blacks remained. Cleaver compares this to the modern day tendency for interracial coupling.

Vietnam appears in non-fiction

Vietnam is an Asian country and the site of a conflict in which American troops become highly involved. Cleaver talks of the significance of the timing of Vietnam in relation to the Negro revolution in America.



The Twist appears in non-fiction

The Twist is a dance that Cleaver says began the integration of the white people into the black culture in America.

Maginot Line appears in non-fiction

Maginot Line is the imaginary line separating the classes, in this case, blacks from whites.

The Mind appears in non-fiction

The Mind is the word used by Cleaver when referring to the upper class of a society. In this case, it's the white men who are the "Godheads," or rulers. Cleaver uses the word because he says the members of this class forsake their bodies in favor of the mind.

The Body appears in non-fiction

The lower of the classes, according to Cleaver, are The Body. In this case, it refers to the blacks, particularly black men who are historically viewed as those who engage in regular menial labor, meaning their strength is in the superior condition of their bodies.



Themes

Self Discovery

Eldridge Cleaver begins his book by saying that he was made aware of his situation as a black in white America by the racial tension around him. He says he'd always been aware that he was "black," but had not paid attention to the social standing and the true meaning. He begins to write as a means toward self-discovery. He talks extensively about his own need to understand his motivations, desires and goals. At one point, Cleaver finds himself in a padded room - literally - and says he is disappointed at the lack of help available. While there are psychiatrists, they are unwilling to help him down that path of self-discovery. Instead, they focus on the typical problems that manifest themselves in adult psychiatric problems - childhood and parents. While the psychiatrists claim Cleaver was angry with his mother, he knows that he must resolve his inner turmoil regarding the racial issues of the day.

Cleaver doesn't end the book with a major revelation, nor does one become apparent during the course of the manuscript. Instead, Cleaver seems to come to a gentle awakening. He seems to slowly analyze himself and his situation. He ends the book with an apology to all black women. He speaks of the hundreds of years of oppression and the millions of screams issued by black women over the course of that time. He says that he's sorry that he (black men in general) didn't do something to stop the pain. In this way, he seems to complete the journey, as far as anyone can complete such a monumental acceptance.

Acceptance

Eldridge Cleaver admits from the first chapter of his book that he is enamored with white women. He says he loathes himself for that fact, calling it a weakness and even a sickness among black men. While there's no magical point at which he claims to have overcome or cured himself of that desire, he does come to a point of acceptance. The road to that acceptance is filled with self-discovery, because the two points are intricately connected. Cleaver can't accept himself, his desires, weaknesses and goals, without learning about himself. In addition, he can't learn about himself without honest evaluation of those same desires, weaknesses and goals. There are some things Cleaver accepts as necessary - including interaction between the sexes. In fact, he explains that by talking about the "primeval ooze" theory. He says that the forerunner of modern humans pulled itself from the ooze and split into two parts - male and female. The two have continually sought to reunite ever since.

However, on other points, Cleaver is not nearly so accepting. He talks of his disgust for himself when a prison guard points out that Cleaver has a pin up of a white woman on his cell wall. He claims not to have given it conscious thought, but hates the fact that he passed over pictures of black women in favor of a white woman. There's never a point



at which Cleaver simply decides that he accepts himself as he is. It's actually a long-term project, and his own self-analysis becomes the means by which he eventually seems to move into a more peaceful existence with himself and his circumstances. It's important to note that Cleaver ends the book with the expectation of continuing change for blacks. It's likely that his sense of self and acceptance of himself would otherwise have been much different.

Coming of Age

Cleaver's book is the epitome of a coming of age story. Cleaver himself says that he's no longer the man he was at twenty-two when he was incarcerated for the first time. The story touches only briefly on the actions of the young Eldridge Cleaver. He says he was first busted for possession of marijuana. He claims to have been "in love with the weed" and that he saw nothing wrong with smoking the drug. He then became a rapist and admits that his crimes would likely have eventually escalated to murder had he not been caught and once again imprisoned.

Cleaver then spent some years behind bars. Though there are times when he seems to want to fit in, there's increasing evidence that he's willing to stand on his own and to stand up for what he believes. This is evident in his stand for Malcolm X. Elijah Muhammad was the accepted Muslim leader until Malcolm X preached against some of Elijah's teachings - including total racism on the part of blacks. While the majority stood with Elijah, Cleaver says he was the first to say that he believed in Malcolm X and would throw his support to that leader. Cleaver is later called on to maintain peace among the Muslims in Folsom Prison - a statement of his standing in the Muslim community. Though Cleaver spends little time in this vein, his growing independence is evident. He admits that he does what's necessary to avoid conflict with other inmates, but says he really wants only to write and read - activities that promote his own maturity without affecting others.

Style

Perspective

The book is written from the first person perspective of Eldridge Cleaver, an inmate in Folsom Prison in 1965 when the civil rights movement and Vietnam Conflict were major American issues. With one exception - a single letter from Cleaver's attorney - the entire work is from Cleaver's own hand. The author talks extensively of events and people important to the civil rights movement of the mid to late 1960s. While it's an incredibly effective tool, younger readers - who did not live during that era - may miss some of the finer points of the writing. Many of the references likely have a deeper impact for readers who remember the 1960s and the civil unrest than for those who have only second-hand knowledge of the time.

The writing is sometimes convoluted with the author making obscure references that are difficult to understand and difficult to put into perspective. It's also often necessary for the reader to evaluate certain statements and references to determine their significance.

Tone

The tone of the book is often negative, though the writer seems honest in his evaluations and observations. Still, as is the case with any work of this type, it's vital for the reader to remember that there's an absolute need to weigh the writer's words. A black man writing about the trials of black men in American is bound to be at least somewhat slanted, just as a white man's account of the same situation would be slanted in a different way.

There's little doubt that Cleaver is well read and intelligent, sometimes to the point that he "out writes" those most likely to seek out this manuscript. Often waxing poetic and pushing the literary license to the limit, the prose itself often becomes convoluted to the point of misdirecting the reader's attention away from the bottom line - Cleaver's take on blacks in society. The language is sometimes coarse, offering an accurate account of the conversations Cleaver describes. The references to blacks and white are often stark with little done to cushion Cleaver's opinion of the controversy. Profanity is present, but only occasionally and not so often that the reader is caught up in the wording.

Structure

The book is divided into four sections. Three of those are also divided into chapters. The final chapter, "To All Black Women, From All Black Men," is an open "letter" or essay used by Cleaver to look back across centuries of black oppression. Cleaver talks at length in this chapter about the impotence of the black slave and offers an apology for not having done more to prevent the atrocities visited upon the black women. The third section, "Prelude to Love - Three Letters," is a series of two letters written by Eldridge



Cleaver to his attorney, San Francisco lawyer Beverly Axlerod. One of the letters is from Axlerod to Cleaver. Those letters are personal in nature and hint at a budding relationship between the two. Ironically, the dedication at the beginning of the book becomes an important part of the manuscript, because it provides a clue as to the result of that relationship. In that dedication, Cleaver offers the book to Beverly, "with whom I share the ultimate of love." The reader is left to evaluate that for himself.



Quotes

"Therefore, all religions were phony - which made all preachers and priests, in our eyes, fakers, including the ones scurrying around the prison who, curiously, could put in a good word for you with the Almighty Creator of the universe, but could not get anything down with the warden or parole board - they could usher you through the Pearly Gates after you were dead, but not through the prison gate while you were still alive and kicking."

— Eldridge Cleaver, 1965 Chapter 1, Page 5

"I have lived those lines and I know that if I had not been apprehended I would have slit some white throats."

— Eldridge Cleaver, 1965 Chapter 1, Page 14

"Had I been fool enough to go to the Protestant chapel, one black face in a sea of white, and with guerrilla warfare going on between us, I might have ended up a Christian martyr - St. Eldridge the Stupe."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 3, Page 30

"If he had become a Quaker, a Catholic or a Seventh-Day Adventist, or a Sammy Davis-style Jew, and if he had continued to give voice to the mute ambitions in the black man's soul, his message would still have been triumphant: because what was great was not Malcolm X but the truth he uttered."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 6, Page 59

"Right from the go, let me make one thing absolutely clear: I am not now, nor have I ever been a white man. No, I hasten to add, am I now a Black Muslim - although I used to be."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 7, Page 65

"The racist conscience of America is such that murder does not register as murder, really, unless the victim is white."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 7, Page 73

"Sanctified by religion, justified by philosophy and legalized by the Supreme Court, separate-but-equal was enforced by day by agencies of the law and by the KKK & Co. under cover of night.:

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 7, Page 79

"One was the master and the other was the slave until a moment ago when they both were declared to be equal 'men'; which leaves American men literally without a unitary, nationally viable self-image."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 8, Page 86



"There is no doubt that white America will accept a black champion, applaud and reward him, as long as there is no 'white hope' in sight."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 8, Page 92

"I, for one, do not think homosexuality is the latest advance over heterosexuality on the scale of human evolution. Homosexuality is a sickness, just as are the baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 9, Page 110

"The question of the Negro's place in America, which for a long time could actually be kicked around as a serious question, has been decisively resolved: he is here to stay."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 10, Page 114

"The white-supremacy-oriented white man feels less compunction about massacring 'niggers' than he does about massacring any other race of people on earth."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 11 , Page 122

"Black Americans are considered to be the world's biggest fools to go to another country to fight for something they don't have for themselves."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 11, Page 127.

"I will not be free until the day I can have a white woman in my bed and a white man minds his own business."

— The Accused, Chapter 13, Page 160

"The white man turned the white woman into a weak-minded, weak-bodied, delicate freak, a sex pot, and placed her on a pedestal; he turned the black woman into a strong self-reliant Amazon and deposited her into his kitchen - that's the secret of Aunt Jemima's bandanna."

— The Accused, Chapter 13, Page 162

"Deep-seated fears and emotions, which are in fact connected with biological traits and are part of the mechanism to aid racial and ethnic survival, are harnessed to social images and thereby transformed into weapons of the Class Struggle."

— Eldridge Cleaver, Chapter 15, Page 190



Topics for Discussion

Explain the relationship between blacks and whites, men and women, and the upper and lower social classes, according to Cleaver.

What are "the mind" and "the body," according to Cleaver? Define the two with regard to rank and social class. Explain why the two envy each other.

What is "The Ogre." How does Cleaver submit to the draw of this monster? Explain why Cleaver's pin-up was ripped from his wall when other inmates were allowed their own. What was his reaction?

What landed Cleaver in prison? What does he say about his own spiral of misconduct with regard to murder?

How does Cleaver describe himself after his encounter with his attorney? How does this relationship go against the grain of typical inmate/attorney relationships?

Describe the conversation between "the Eunuchs" and "the Accused." Did "the Accused" react as Cleaver had expected? Do you think they would have begun the conversation had they known the outcome?

What was Cleaver's job in prison? What was a typical day like for Cleaver in prison?

How does Cleaver cope with solitary confinement? Why does he say he takes this course?