

Notes to a native son

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1) From the last paragraph in the biographical section on page 51 that starts with "In 'Notes of a Native Son,'" was most useful to my understanding of this essay because it gives a brief summary of Baldwin's essay. However, the first couple of sentences on page 49 gave me an idea of what kind of writer Baldwin is: "took on the responsibility of speaking as a black American about the 'Negro problems in America.'"

2) Baldwin's father is a minister whom he never gets to know as a true loving parent. There are few instances where Baldwin says his father said something nice. His father complimented his brilliant choir boy voice in church, which brought much joy to his father. Baldwin says, "I remembered that he had always been grinning with pleasure when my solos ended." (p. 64) Indeed his father was proud of his son at one point in his life. For the most part Baldwin's father was bitter and isolated. Baldwin's father drove his family farther and farther away from him. His father was so full of hatred that it consumed him like gangrene which is slow and demoralizing till the day he died. All that Baldwin has so strongly imprinted in his mind about his father is that he told him to never trust white people. Ultimately, his father's hatred for whites destroys him and causes much anger in his son's life.

3) In section III, Baldwin begins with his father's funeral. Then he goes into reminiscing the times when his father was alive, realizing that they hadn't talked much. Then back to the funeral, "The casket now was opened and the mourners were being led up the aisle to look for the last time on the deceased." (p. 65) Baldwin takes a last look at his father's face. After the funeral, he celebrates his birthday in downtown. Meanwhile, in Harlem (uptown), a riot occurs carried out by a group of angry mob, that started

from a fight in Hotel Braddock between a Negro soldier and a white policeman.

The rumor was “ that the soldier had been shot in the back, an instantaneous and revealing invention, and that the soldier had died protecting a Negro woman.” (p. 65) Baldwin explains the scene of Harlem after the riot. He goes on to saying that the riot was the consequence of pure hatred between the blacks and whites. Baldwin ends this essay with the thought that he must learn to balance acceptance of life with the idea of equal power. “ One must never . . . accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one’s strength.” (p. 67)

4) The funeral day of Baldwin’s father there was mass hysteria in Harlem. Baldwin says, “ A few hours after my father’s funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker’s chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem. On the morning of the 3rd of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.” (p. 52) The smashed plate glass symbolizes the broken community and broken life that Baldwin’s father led. The chaotic racial tensions in Harlem never ceased to die even with Baldwin’s father who was a bitter man. Much like Baldwin’s father’s life his funeral is surrounded by what essentially was wrong with Harlem; the poverty and racial hatred. His father was a very sequestered man.

He couldn’t live with white people because of the slavery issue; Baldwin’s grandfather was a slave from New Orleans. Not showing any love for the children caused much despair in the life of Baldwin’s father. There is a schism of love and hate inside his father. Baldwin says, “ In my mind’s eye I could see him, sitting at the window, locked up in his terrors; hating and

fearing every living soul including his children who had betrayed him, too, by reaching towards the world which had despised him." (p. 54)

5) "Notes of a Native Son" is a journey into the life and mind of James Baldwin, a young black man feeling oppressed by not only the "white man" but his own father. As he reflects back on his past, he is more understanding of the present. I believe the main point of this essay is about realization and acceptance. Baldwin, who is seemingly naïve and not understanding of his father's views, soon becomes filled with the "intolerable bitterness" of his father. In the end, he realizes "the dead man mattered; blackness and whiteness did not matter." (p. 67) His comforting tone puts the reader in his position, and allows one to become a part of him and his history. As a young child, I think it was hard for Baldwin to relate to his father. His father's hatred and detachment from, not only society, but from his family, caused confusion for Baldwin.

He didn't understand why his father thought, "white people would do anything to keep a Negro down" (p. 56), and why the presence of a white person in his house was a violation. It was in his innocence that he denied his father and his views. Lack of education made it hard for Baldwin to fathom reality, his innocence became ignorance, and it was not until he was placed in the "read world" that he saw what caused his father to be so bitter for so many years. The discrimination he was faced with made him "colder and more murderous than ever." (p. 58) He was no longer naïve, and he carried hatred in his heart. Baldwin soon realized that "hatred itself becomes an exhausting and self-destructive pose." (p. 67) Growth and the acquiring of knowledge over time allowed Baldwin to see the "big picture" more clearly.

He learned ideas of acceptance and equal power. It's as if his perception of life completely changed, he didn't want to die like his father, bitter and cold, so he decided to let go. It was important to keep his " own heart free of hatred and despair." (p. 67)

6) The paragraphs that I find emotionally powerful were from pages 57-58 where Baldwin spends his last night in New Jersey with his white friend. It was effective because Baldwin feels the rage that was learned, acquired and, passed down from his father, he let's loose against his enemy in the fancy restaurant. Baldwin says, " There was nothing on the table but an ordinary water-mug half full of water, and I picked this up and hurled it with all my strength at her. She ducked and it missed her and shattered against the mirror behind the bar." (p. 58) The horror and real anger against whites that Baldwin possesses is clearly conveyed in this quote, he is fed up with them.

His father's " preaching's" have finally come out, all that hatred pours out in the restaurant. He wants to show them how black he really is. Baldwin is sick of the white men's ignorance. His rage drives him to the brink of destruction. He can not live with all this hatred suppressed inside of him anymore. 7)

What parallels exist between Baldwin's bitterness and his father's bitterness? How did the war affect the African-American communities (especially Harlem) in the U. S.? What is James Baldwin's tone like in this essay?