

The fire next time: an evaluation



“ None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free” – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

The history of the United States from the eyes of the “ American Negro,” to use the now-dated literary term, is both bleak and cruel. A country of racial intolerance and hostility is, according to the literary notions of James Baldwin, unhealthy for both the oppressor and the oppressed. In his nonfiction argument *The Fire Next Time*, among other works, Baldwin, enraged at the ongoing racial stalemate in the mid-twentieth century United States, explores the psychological impact of institutionalized racism and segregation in relation to American identity.

The African-American “ problem” was as much of an identity crisis for America as it was a wholly American issue, forcing the nation to reflect not only on its history as a slave-driven economy, but also on its founding principles of equality and freedom. In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin argues that the prevalent American standard, which dictated the country for hundreds of years, needed a desperate reformation of character, morals, and justice if order and national stability were to be preserved throughout racial integration: “ I am far from convinced that being released from the African witch doctor was worthwhile if I am now... expected to become dependent on the American psychiatrist... White people cannot... be taken as models of how to live. Rather, the white man is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him... in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being” (section 95-96). The predominant American standard of the time was threatened by a people who, for several hundred years, were disenfranchised and enslaved for no

reason other than the color of their skin. America faced an identity crisis, as Baldwin alludes, as the American standard itself was being attacked by black power and blacks' desire for freedom, forcing white Americans to scrutinize not only themselves and their own conditions, but also those which they inflicted on black Americans and the universal human suffering that each race endured.

Furthermore, Baldwin attributes America's identity crisis to its reluctance to consider itself a "mixed" and incredibly diverse nation. "...White Americans have supposed "Europe" and "civilization" to be synonyms — which they are not — and have been distrustful of other standards and other sources of vitality, especially those produced in America itself, and have attempted to behave in all matters as though what was east for Europe was also east for them" (section 92-93). America, Baldwin claims, aspired to Eurocentric standards; failing to both realize and embrace its own cultural and racial diversity. As the various Civil Rights and Black Power movements grew stronger, however, Baldwin recognized the United States' rapidly transforming identity as blacks moved more and more into the central American cultural, political, and economical sphere, which strayed further and further from Western Europe's largely homogenous racial plateau, stating that "What it comes to is that if we, who can scarcely be considered a white nation, persist in thinking of ourselves as one, we condemn ourselves, with the truly white nations, to sterility and decay" (section 93). Overall, as black Americans grew more politically active and demanded freedom from institutionalized oppression, such as segregation, Baldwin argued that a massive shift in the nation's character was imminent as

blacks, chanting both “ freedom” and “ black power,” disrupted and threatened the status quo of white superiority, forcing the nation to reflect on the injustice and cruelty its citizens of color faced.

James Baldwin, in his tract *The Fire Next Time*, analyzes the impact that institutional oppression has on both the nation and its people through the lens of national identity. He describes, rather brilliantly, the social handicaps that segregation and racism have on black Americans, encouraging his readers to take action and rely not on the church or on the false promises of government to heal the violent racial climate in the twentieth century United States. Baldwin’s genius comes not from his love of one side or the other in the racial conflict, but of neither. Focusing on the individual, rather than the color of his skin, Baldwin is a supporter of human advancement and opportunity. He recognizes, above all else, that the Negro’s condition is simply a mirror into the white American’s fears; his literary work pounded readers with the truth of their own condition – the price of freedom and equality for Americans as a whole was the liberation, advancement, and peaceful integration of black Americans.