

THE RACIAL ATTITUDES OF THE WHITE PERSON
TOWARD THE BLACK PERSON AS REPRESENTED
IN SELECTED WORKS OF JAMES BALDWIN

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

James Arthur Baldwin, born in Harlem in 1924, refers to the blackness of his skin as his greatest blessing and his greatest curse.¹ Although he has been painfully hampered because of being a Negro in this predominantly white society, he has refused to be discouraged by this condition. He has forced himself to surmount the barrier of his color and to achieve an understanding of himself and of his relationship to society. Baldwin says that he has had to give up any illusions about himself or about the world. His compulsion for lucid understanding and expression has also enabled him to become an effective writer.²

Because James Baldwin spent his childhood in the Harlem ghetto, he did not have much direct experience with the white world until he reached his late teens. At an early age, however, he knew the misery of being poor, and he knew the frustration of competing with eight siblings for the attention of his mother. His most painful memories are those of his

¹James Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," Notes of a Native Son (Boston, 1955), p. 5.

²Baldwin, "Introduction," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1961), p. 12.

relationship with his father, a Sunday preacher consumed with hatred of the white world. David Baldwin fervently practiced the Pentecostal religion in the hope that he would obtain future reward and that the whites, sinners who had caused him much humiliation, would be punished.³ He insisted that his whole family center their lives upon the church and demanded that they avoid contact with unrighteous people of their own race, such as the junkies, prostitutes, and racketeers of the Harlem streets. He also became very angry if his children associated with any person whose skin was white. If David Baldwin loved his children, seemingly he never succeeded in demonstrating this fact to them. He constantly reminded James that he was ugly and beyond salvation. The image which the child had of himself, as a result of his father's cruelty, was that of a "worthless human being."⁴ Because James could never satisfy his father nor achieve the perfection which his father's religion demanded, the boy was convinced of his own wickedness. The strong feelings of guilt, which originated in Baldwin's childhood, have apparently remained with him throughout his life, and his struggle to respect himself has been both difficult and constant.

At the time of David Baldwin's death, James was nineteen. The boy had been a minister for three years during his attendance

³Fern Maya Eckman, The Furious Passage of James Baldwin (New York, 1966), p. 35.

⁴Ibid.

at high school but had withdrawn from that profession because he felt hypocritical. He thought that taking his parishioners' money, while counseling them to endure a miserable life on earth for the sake of heavenly glory, was a crime as great as those perpetrated by the racketeers on Lenox Avenue.⁵ After resigning from the ministry, James left Harlem for a year to work in New Jersey, where he first experienced "Jim Crow." In "Notes of a Native Son," he described the rage he felt upon being refused service in a restaurant. He began to understand his father's hatred of the white world. When, upon returning to Harlem, he saw his father dead, destroyed by paranoia, Baldwin realized that hatred could also destroy him if he allowed it to embitter him beyond his control.⁶

Baldwin had shown a talent for writing even when he was very young. By the time he was twenty-four, he had written essays, book reviews, a short story, and an unpublished novel. Exhausted by the demands of his literary efforts, frustrated by the attitude of the white world, and afraid of the hatred within himself, James Baldwin felt that he could no longer live a useful and productive life in America.⁷ He fled to France, where he thought the racial situation to be less

⁵Baldwin, "Down at the Cross, Letter from a Region in My Mind," The Fire Next Time (New York, 1963), p. 53.

⁶Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," Notes of a Native Son, p. 113.

⁷Eckman, p. 113.

oppressive. Once in Europe, Baldwin realized that he could become a writer only by coping first with the question of his color as it related to his total self-understanding.⁸ Many of his early essays are spiritual autobiography, a record of his attempt to perceive the significance of his past, to understand the facets of his personality, and to determine his mission as a writer.

In Europe, Baldwin reassessed his past, recalling parts of his life from which he had long tried to escape. Through listening to records of the blues singer, Bessie Smith, he was able to remember events and feelings from his early life. He came to a partial understanding of how and why he had been degraded in America, of what it meant to be a "nigger."⁹ The most difficult admission for Baldwin to make to himself was that of his hatred and fear of white people. He resolved not to be ruled by subdued and unexpressed hostile feelings, but to live with them openly and consciously. James Baldwin realized that he could no longer escape his American Negro heritage; instead, he must view his past clearly, utilizing his experience in his writing.¹⁰

Achievement of cultural identity was at first of great concern to Baldwin. His heritage as a black person lay,

⁸Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 5.

⁹Baldwin, "The Discovery of What it Means to Be An American," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1961), p. 18.

¹⁰Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 6.

unknown to him, in the continent of Africa, and his people had been forcibly detached from their past when they were brought to America as slaves. Realizing that his ancestors were not the men of the West who had created and controlled civilization, he decided that he would have to appropriate from Western civilization that which was meaningful to him.¹¹ He also became aware that the growth of Africa as a world power would affect him and his race positively by demonstrating the importance of black people in the world.¹² Although he desired to learn more about his African heritage, Baldwin felt that this was only one part of his cultural background.

While Baldwin was in Europe, he also came to understand anew his relationship to American culture. Baldwin had thought, upon fleeing to Europe, that his sense of alienation was caused by his blackness, but he soon found that both black and white Americans visiting in Europe shared this feeling. He came to realize that all Americans have been cut off from their origins, whether willfully or forcibly, and that all Americans have faced the necessity of creating meaningful lives in a new environment. The problem of the American people is that "we don't know who we are."¹³ In order to solve this problem,

¹¹Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," Notes of a Native Son (Boston, 1955), p. 173.

¹²Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1961), p. 27.

¹³Baldwin, "The Discovery of What it Means to Be an American," p. 18.

Baldwin says, the American people need each other. To shape the future, they need to use the experience which the different races have shared on this continent for the last three hundred years.

Baldwin believes that he can help to change the course of history through his writing. The particular point of view which Baldwin's cultural marginality has afforded him may have aided him in discerning some undesirable aspects of American life. He suggests that the task of a writer should be to tell the truth about life as he sees it, revealing the complexity of the human being and his world.¹⁴ He feels a responsibility to "help excavate the buried consciousness of this country,"¹⁵ and he believes that in order to do this, he must portray reality as faithfully as possible. The writer, he says, should force men to see themselves as they are.

James Baldwin has achieved importance as an American writer because of his perceptiveness in creating social situations and because of his insight into the problems of real people. In his novels, essays, plays, and short fiction, Baldwin treats questions which transcend racial differences:

¹⁴Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," Notes of a Native Son (Boston, 1955), p. 15.

¹⁵Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1961), p. 190.

alienation, the meaning of the common experience of black and white Americans, the relationship of the individual to society, the need for love, the difficulty of achieving sexual fulfillment, the hypocrisy of the Christian religion, and the search for identity.

Baldwin is also important because he is a creative black man writing in the last half of the twentieth century, a time in which black people are urgently demanding their right to live in human dignity. Although other Negro writers have contributed to American literature, Baldwin has been the foremost literary spokesman of the black revolution. At a time in history when it is vital for white people to be fully aware of their black countrymen, Baldwin has tried to let his white audience know what it feels like to be a Negro in America. At a time in history when it is a necessity for black men to have a sense of their own worth, Baldwin has tried to explode the myth of Negro inferiority.

James Baldwin laments that one of his main difficulties as a Negro writer has been counteracting the effect of the large amount of material written about "the Negro problem."¹⁶ Usually, says Baldwin, this material has only reinforced traditional attitudes, presumably those of integrationists and segregationists. Furthermore, it has oversimplified the

¹⁶Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," p. 6.

problem and has avoided recognition of the humanity of the black man. Taking a more complex approach, Baldwin attempts to destroy racial stereotypes and to examine present-day attitudes. He communicates the diverse and complicated experience of individuals whose lives are valuable and meaningful. Baldwin feels that being a Negro in a world ruled by whites must be discussed in the context of "the history, traditions, customs, the moral assumptions and preoccupations of the country; in short, the general social fabric."¹⁷

One of Baldwin's chief goals has been to understand the racial attitudes of white people and black people in America. Attitudes are difficult to identify. The holder himself often has trouble tracing, in an objective fashion, attitudes to their ultimate sources, and another person, an outsider, performs this task with equal difficulty. Attitudes are particularly difficult to isolate and define because they are often found at subconscious levels, soaked up unwittingly from communal associations and therefore insidious. Racial attitudes are displayed in many devious ways, ways concealed from the holder himself. Men manifest themselves both directly and indirectly. Occasionally they will analyze their own stance and state it as clearly as possible. More often they will simply speak and act (or refrain from acting) in such a way as to make manifest their thought and feeling.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 8.

The word attitude itself can be vague and misleading because it is commonly used in a variety of ways. It can refer to an emotion, belief, opinion, action, feeling, or disposition. Often the rational and the emotional or irrational bases of an attitude are too closely connected to be separated. Baldwin seems to interpret the word attitude to mean a fairly consistent manner of response to particular stimuli, reflecting a belief or an emotion; and the word will be used in this sense.

In spite of the difficulty in defining, recognizing, and understanding attitudes, this task is of utmost importance to men as social beings. It has become an axiom of modern psychology that men cannot relate meaningfully to each other unless they know how they feel about each other, unless they can communicate their thoughts and feelings in an accurate and truthful way. The comprehension of attitudes is of particular importance to those who, like Baldwin, aspire to take part in precipitating changes in society which will benefit all of its members. Such changes are unlikely to occur unless people understand themselves, and the recognition of attitudes is an important step in this process.

James Baldwin is extremely perceptive in presenting racial attitudes of black people and white people. He feels that it is part of his task as a writer "to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source."¹⁸ Unwilling simply

¹⁸Ibid.

to protest against injustice, Baldwin thinks it necessary to determine why people feel and act as they do. Baldwin has been faced with the dilemma of whether to address himself primarily to his own people, the blacks, or to speak more forcibly to the whites. He does, seemingly, intend to make the black person aware of his own crippling attitudes, such as inferiority and rage. While he examines these attitudes with sympathy, he makes it clear that the black person need not be defeated by self-deprecation and bitterness. It is, nevertheless, possible to detect on the part of Baldwin an even more ardent desire to make the white man conscious of his attitudes toward Negroes and to analyze the reasons for these attitudes--to dredge up from the subconscious all those matters that should be unacceptable in a Christian and democratic society. Therefore, this study will concern itself primarily with Baldwin's treatment of the attitudes he thinks most white people hold. Chapter Two deals with the white person's attitude of superiority, discussing hatred, paternalism, and evasion as different forms of the same attitude, and Chapter Three deals with the white person's attitude of innocence. Baldwin evidently feels that these attitudes are just as harmful to the white person as to the black person.

In considering the racial attitudes of white people, Baldwin shares his subject matter with the sociologist, the

historian, the political scientist, the psychologist, and the theologian. Baldwin, however, approaches this subject as a creative writer and personal essayist. In his essays, Baldwin records his personal observations of racism and gives his interpretation of its origins, causes, and effects. In his plays, short stories, and novels, Baldwin incorporates his ideas about racial attitudes into setting, characterization, and plot. In this study Baldwin's characterization will be of primary import.

CHAPTER II

THE WHITE PERSON'S ATTITUDE OF RACIAL SUPERIORITY TOWARD THE BLACK PERSON

In considering the attitude of racial superiority adopted by white Americans, James Baldwin seems convinced that it exists widespread throughout the social structure of the nation. He points out that most white people exhibit their typical stance as they control the lives of black people through politics, economics, and culture. He theorizes that the attitude originated in Europe and developed in America, and he suggests the causes to be insecurity, guilt and fear about sex, fear of losing status, and lack of identity. Baldwin further analyzes specific geographic areas of the country, citing the practice of official segregation as evidence of the attitude of superiority in the South. He sees the Southerner's hatred and paternalism as different ways of expressing superiority, and he examines the various environmental and psychological factors which cause a person to exhibit his attitude in a particular way. In treating superiority in the North, Baldwin points to the nature of public education and to the existence of the ghetto as evidence that

white Northerners do feel superior to Negroes, and he discusses the effect of this attitude upon the ghetto dweller. He says that the white Northerner exhibits his feeling of superiority by ignoring the black person. Whether the Northerners ignore the black person or whether the Southerners hate or patronize him, they both demonstrate an obvious feeling of superiority.

The general political, economic, and cultural domination of the black began, according to Baldwin, with slavery and has continued unabated since the abolition of slavery. Institutional and social attitudes were set up and have continued to be inculcated without any real effort at change. In an emotional letter written for publication and probably intended to shock white readers into awareness of their own attitudes, Baldwin forcibly calls attention to this social phenomenon.

You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity . . . that you were a worthless human being . . . you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and how you could do it) and where you could live and whom you could marry. I know your countrymen do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying, "You exaggerate." They do not know Harlem, and I do.¹

¹Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," pp. 21, 22.

In the short story, "Going to Meet the Man," Baldwin tells of Jesse, a small-town deputy sheriff who has been trying to prevent Negroes from registering to vote. With a cattle prod Jesse administers a brutal beating to one of the young black demonstrators who refuses to stop his people from singing.² Although most white Americans would abhor the sheriff's use of cattle prods on a human being, they might not realize that this violence is only one means by which whites maintain political control. Persons more civilized than Jesse exercise their control in more subtle ways. For instance, in the area of politics, Baldwin mentions the promises which white candidates for public office make to black people in order to secure their vote.³ Once elected, the officials usually fail to fulfill their pledges, and the condition of the black people goes unchanged.

Baldwin also refers to the economic victimization of Negroes. A resident of Harlem pays higher prices for food and rent than a white city dweller pays, and the quality of goods and services in the ghetto is lower than in other parts of the city. Baldwin challenges the reader to "go shopping one day in Harlem--for anything--and compare Harlem

²Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man," Going to Meet the Man (New York, 1965), p. 233.

³Baldwin, "Journey to Atlanta," Notes of a Native Son (Boston, 1955), p. 73.

prices and quality with those downtown."⁴ One of the reasons that the ghetto stays poor is that the average Harlem resident makes no profits from the community businesses. The proprietors of most stores, with the exception of funeral parlors and shoe repair shops, are white and, like the slum landlords, live in another part of the city.⁵

Although Baldwin does not minimize the importance of economics and politics, he deals primarily with the ways in which white people maintain cultural control of society. Through culture, the self images of people are shaped. The attitude of white superiority is reflected and perpetuated in the literature of the English-speaking peoples, which often equates blackness with sin and damnation, and whiteness with virtue and salvation; in the Christian religion, which has historically presumed the existence of a white God; and in the history of Western civilization, which is usually studied as world history.⁶

An attitude of racial superiority is also reinforced and transmitted culturally through myths, fictitious stories which white men have created about black men instead of recognizing them as persons. According to such conceptions,

⁴Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1961), p. 59.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," pp. 163, 166, 172.

the Negro may be the "soul of rhythm,"⁷ the kind and forgiving Uncle Tom, or the sexually dangerous Tom. Baldwin claims that the characterizations in these legends reveal more about the creators of the myths than the people in them. For instance, the version of the Negro as naturally ignorant, lazy, and happy-go-lucky is actually a rationalization for the institutions designed to develop and perpetuate these characteristics.⁸ Baldwin seems to feel that the white man projects his deep-seated and ill-defined fears into myths about the black man.

As Sheriff Jesse, of "Going to Meet the Man," lies in bed, dreading to go to work and face the demonstrators the next day, he thinks of "the niggers":

They were animals, they were no better than animals, what could be done with people like that? Here they had been in a civilized country for years and they still lived like animals. Their houses were dark, with oil cloth on cardboard in the windows, the smell was enough to make you puke your guts out, and there they sat, a whole tribe, pumping out kids, it looked like, every damn five minutes, and laughing and talking and playing music like they didn't have a care in the world, and he reckoned they didn't neither, and coming to the door, into the sunlight, just standing there, just looking foolish, not thinking of anything but just getting back to what they were doing, saying yes suh, Mr. Jesse. I surely will,

⁷Baldwin, "Encounter on the Seine: Black Meets Brown," Notes of a Native Son (Boston, 1955), p. 119.

⁸Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1961), p. 112.

Mr. Jesse. Fine weather, Mr. Jesse. Why, I thank you, Mr. Jesse.⁹

Jesse obviously subscribes to the myths which characterize Negroes as animalistic, dirty, carefree, musical, and sexually potent.

An interesting facet of Baldwin's effort to analyze racial discrimination is his addressing himself thoughtfully to the origin and development of this phenomenon. In discussing how it all started, Baldwin is not writing as an historian, but as a mere personal assessor of the past. He says in "Stranger in the Village" that the attitude of white superiority did not originate in America, but is based on the European idea that "white men are the creators of civilization and . . . therefore, civilization's guardians and defenders."¹⁰ Baldwin was the first black man to be seen by the citizens of a small Swiss village. He compares his arrival there to the imaginary arrival of the first white Europeans in an African village several hundred years ago, and asks the white reader to put himself into a black skin and view the conqueror's attitude from the perspective of the conquered.

I thought of white men arriving for the first time in an African village, strangers there, as I am a stranger here, and tried to imagine the astounded populace touching their hair and marveling at the color of their skin. But there is

⁹Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man," p. 231.

¹⁰Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," p. 172.

a great difference in being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites. The white man takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned; whereas I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even, in a sense, created me, people who have cost me more in anguish and rage than they will ever know, who yet do not know of my existence.¹¹

In this dramatization, Baldwin tends to romanticize the African villagers, over-stressing their innocence and simplicity. The example is valuable, nevertheless, because it enables the white person to see that, from a black person's point of view, the idea of white supremacy is unjustifiable.

The idea of white supremacy was first called into question on the American continent. Europeans had been able to avoid recognizing the humanity of their African subjects because the two races did not live together on the same continent. Americans, however, from their earliest beginnings, have been daily confronted with black people and have had to adopt attitudes toward them. This long confrontation has caused a moral and ideological confusion which has not yet been cleared up. If the American settlers had recognized the slaves as equals, they would have negated the idea of white supremacy brought from Europe. If, on the

¹¹Ibid., pp. 163-164.

other hand, they had denied the evidence of the humanity of the blacks as their European forebears had done, they would not have lived up to certain ethical and social ideas which also originated in Europe.¹² Presumably Baldwin refers to such matters as freedom, justice, and the dignity of man. Baldwin might also have reference to the Christian ideals of justice and of love.

Baldwin attempts to analyze and explain the white American's continued attitude of superiority. In the essay, "In Search of a Majority," he advances the theory that the need to feel superior reveals a basic insecurity on the part of the whites.

We would never, never allow Negroes to starve, to grow bitter, and to die in ghettos all over the country if we were not driven by some nameless fear that has nothing to do with Negroes. We would never victimize, as we do, children, whose only crime is color and keep them, as we put it, in their place. We wouldn't drive Negroes mad as we do by accepting them in ball parks, and on concert stages, but not in our homes and not in our neighborhoods, and not in our churches. It is only too clear that even with the most malevolent will in the world Negroes can never manage to achieve one tenth of the harm which we fear. No, it has everything to do with ourselves. . . .¹³

Part of the white man's insecurity is guilt and fear about sex. He feels guilty subconsciously because he knows that his race has emasculated the black man by stealing his

¹²Ibid., pp. 170-172.

¹³Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," p. 112.

women, his freedom, and his power.¹⁴ At the same time, he is afraid that the black man, who must hate him, desires the white woman. He can admit neither his guilt nor his fear, and so he creates myths which reflect and perpetuate his insecurity. For instance, the myth that the Negro is "a walking phallic symbol"¹⁵ reveals the fear that the Negro is sexually superior to the white man. Baldwin recalls "that peculiar, intent, paranoiac malevolence which one sometimes surprises in the eyes of American white men when, out walking with their Sunday girl, they see a Negro male approach."¹⁶

Lying in bed by his wife, Sheriff Jesse, of "Going to Meet the Man," displays his sexual insecurity as he speculates about the sexuality of Negroes. Even as he curses the race, he remembers his experiences with black women. Although he thinks he is entitled to these relations, he is consumed by the fear that the black men, whom he imagines to be sexually superior, have similar desires for white women. He remembers a lynching he attended as a child. After seeing a Negro man castrated, he could no longer love his best friend, who was black. His feelings toward black people, ever since, have been a mixture of love, hate, fear, and guilt.¹⁷

¹⁴Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter from the South," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1961), p. 94.

¹⁵Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," p. 172.

¹⁶Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," p. 168.

¹⁷Baldwin, "Going to Meet the Man." p. 218.

Baldwin also suggests that the white person in America needs to feel superior because he lacks identity: he does not know who he is.¹⁸ He is afraid to examine his own attitudes and values, he refuses to assess his past, he cannot communicate with other people, and he does not consider his significance to the rest of the world. Baldwin shares this theory of the loss of identity with such contemporary theologians as Paul Tillich, who refers frequently to the same problem.

The decisive element in the predicament of Western man in our period is his loss of the dimension of depth. . . . What is the meaning of life? Where do we come from, where do we go to? What shall we do, what should we become in the short stretch between birth and death? Such questions are not answered or even asked if the "dimension of depth" is lost. And this is precisely what has happened to man in our period of history. He has lost the courage to ask such questions with an infinite seriousness--as former generations did--and he has lost the courage to receive answers to these questions, wherever they may come from.¹⁹

Many Americans, Baldwin believes, substitute status for identity. They strive to acquire money and material goods, the symbols of status. Whites judge a person's worth by his position on the social ladder. They fear the rise of the Negro, who has always held the lowest status in American

¹⁸Baldwin, "The Discovery of What it Means to be an American," p. 18.

¹⁹Paul Tillich, "The Lost Dimension in Religion," Saturday Evening Post (June 14, 1958), pp. 29, 76.

society, because his gain will be their loss.²⁰ If these white people are unable to maintain their financial and social status, their concept of themselves is threatened as Baldwin explains to his nephew:

Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and the stars all aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.²¹

Baldwin is thoroughly cognizant of certain geographic factors in white attitudes. Although the feeling of superiority exists in all parts of the country, it is most obvious in the South. Baldwin generalizes about the Southern attitude in three essays which he wrote after his first visit to the South: "Nobody Knows My Name," "A Fly in Buttermilk," and "Faulkner and Desegregation." Having never lived in this part of the country, Baldwin bases his treatment of Southern racial attitudes on the situations which he observed during his trip and on the conversations that he held with both black and white Southerners. He was also familiar with the stories told him by his friends and relatives about the

²⁰Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," p. 111.

²¹Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," p. 23.

"Old Country." Baldwin himself had also had some experience living among Southerners who worked in the defense plants in New Jersey. After traveling more extensively in the South, Baldwin wrote his play, Blues for Mr. Charlie, in which he develops the characters of a Southern poor white and a Southern liberal.

The practice of official segregation in the South best reflects the attitude of white superiority. For over one hundred years, the whites, through law, have limited the freedom of the blacks. Baldwin uses segregated education as an example of cultural control. Substandard Negro schools produce poorly educated people who are limited in the number and type of occupations which they can pursue. They are unable to hold positions of power in society. Even a Negro principal, who holds one of the highest positions which a black person may hold in this society, has little power with the white school board. The knowledge of impotency causes such frustration among students that many do not finish school. "They become the menial or the criminal or the shiftless, the Negroes whom segregation has produced and whom the South uses to prove that segregation is right."²²

Baldwin sympathizes somewhat with the white Southerner. Although he is appalled at the racial injustice in the South, he understands why the Southerners react defensively to the

²²Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," p. 92.

false moral superiority displayed by Northerners. He states that the attitude in the South is no more repressive than that in the North; white Southerners, at least, express their feelings honestly and openly. Baldwin realizes that Southern whites will find it difficult to change their way of life, but he insists that the transformation cannot be continually postponed. He repeatedly states that black people in America have waited three hundred years too long for their freedom.²³

A common form which the attitude of superiority takes in the South is overt hatred. Baldwin believes that white people in all parts of the country hate black people to some extent, but they often do not admit it. In the South, especially among the less sophisticated members of society, hatred is openly displayed. A minority of people actually allow hatred to direct their actions. Baldwin wrote the play, Blues for Mr. Charlie, in an effort to understand the type of person who is controlled by hatred.²⁴

In "Notes for Blues," a preface to the play, Baldwin says that he had been thinking of the play ever since he heard of the case of Emmett Till, a black person who was murdered in Mississippi by a white man. The murderer was acquitted and later told how he had committed the crime.

²³Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation," Nobody Knows My Name (New York, 1961), p. 101.

²⁴Baldwin, "Notes for Blues," Blues for Mr. Charlie (New York, 1964), p. xiv. ✓

The facts were related in William Bradford Huie's article, "Wolf Whistle." Baldwin was afraid that he would not be able to characterize the murderer because he was, in a sense, repelled by this type of person. He felt, however, a responsibility to try to understand him.

But if it is true, and I believe it is, that all men are brothers, then we have the duty to try to understand this wretched man; and while we probably cannot hope to liberate him, begin working toward the liberation of his children. For we, the American people, have created him, he is our servant; it is we who put the cattle-prodder in his hands, and we are responsible for the crimes that he commits. It is we who have locked him in the prison of his color. It is we who have persuaded him that Negroes are worthless human beings, and that it is his sacred duty, as a white man, to protect the honor and purity of his tribe.²⁵

Baldwin says that he finally resolved to write the play upon hearing of the death of Medgar Evers. Blues for Mr. Charlie was first performed, under the direction of Burgess Meredith, in the Actors Studio Theatre in New York, April 23, 1964.²⁶

Blues for Mr. Charlie takes place in a small Southern town, Plaguetown, U.S.A., during the days of the early sit-in demonstrations. The play concerns the murder of Richard Henry, a young black trouble-maker who has returned from the North, where he was a jazz musician and a drug addict. His murderer is Lyle Britten, an uneducated white storekeeper, who has already killed one Negro. Through the efforts of

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Eckman, p. 231.

Parnell James, the liberal editor of the local newspaper, Lyle is brought to trial but is acquitted.

Lyle Britten's attitude toward black people is simply that they are less than human. When Parnell tells him that he is to be arrested on the charge of murder, Lyle is indignant. He has no doubt that Richard deserved to die because he was an offensive person. He cannot understand why anyone would not approve of his action.

Parnell: . . . What do you mean you don't understand what's come over the people in this town?

Lyle: Raising so much fuss about a nigger --and a northern nigger at that.

Parnell: He was born here. He's Reverend Meridian Henry's son.

Lyle: Well, he'd been gone so long, he might as well have been a northern nigger. Went North and got ruined and come back here to make trouble-- and they tell me he was a dope fiend, too. What's all this fuss about? . . . Has niggers suddenly got to be holy in this town?²⁷

Lyle's friends, including his minister, congratulate him for his deed. The minister assures him that the Negroes in town have been stirring up trouble because they "are harkening to the counsel of these degenerate communist race-mixers."²⁸

In determining why Lyle hated intensely enough to kill, Baldwin reveals that Lyle owned a small store and depended upon Negroes as customers. He was threatened economically

²⁷Baldwin, Blues for Mr. Charlie, pp. 13-14.

²⁸Ibid., p. 49.

when the town Negroes boycotted his store.²⁹ Lyle also feared losing his social status. Because his family had always been poor, he had never enjoyed social prestige, but he had always taken comfort in the fact that Negroes were less important than he was. He expected Negroes to step off the sidewalk as he passed by. He became angry when Richard Henry did not address him as "sir" and killed him after Richard refused to apologize for an insult.

Lyle: I had to kill him. I'm a white man! Can't nobody talk that way to me!³⁰

Another reason for Lyle's hatred was his need for love from the Negro. He had always felt free to go to blacktown for sexual fulfillment, and in his relationships there he had also received love. In fact, he had had a more satisfactory relationship with a black person, Willa Mae,³¹ than with his wife, Jo, whom he had married upon deciding to "settle down" and have children.³² He could not, however, have an open association with a black woman for fear of social disapproval. Because his need for love was not satisfied, Lyle reacted by intensifying his hatred for the very people whose love he desired.

Baldwin was severely criticized in daily newspapers and liberal journals for appearing to propagate the myth of Negro

²⁹Ibid., p. 8.

³⁰Ibid., p. 120.

³¹Baldwin, Blues for Mr. Charlie, p. 68.

³²Ibid., p. 60.

sexuality in Blues. Although it is true that Richard Henry brags about his own sexual experiences and insinuates that Lyle is impotent, it is also true that Baldwin did not intend the audience to interpret Richard's obnoxious remarks as truth. Baldwin was simply trying to say that, no matter how offensive Richard was, he did not deserve to be shot. Fern Eckman, Baldwin's biographer, suggests that "white America, having brainwashed itself into believing that the Negro really is intellectually inferior and sexually superior was willing to accept as fact Richard's braggadocio."³³

Lyle finally admits the murder but says that he is not sorry for it. His wife Jo, on the other hand, indicates that she realizes the gravity of the crime as she responds to Parnell's statement that he had deeply loved a Negro girl.

Jo: Then Lyle could have felt that way about old Bill's wife--about Willa Mae. I know that's not the way he feels about me. And if he felt that way--he could have shot old Bill--to keep him quiet.

Parnell: Jo!

Jo: Yes! And if he could have shot old Bill to keep him quiet--he could have killed that boy. He could have killed that boy. And if he did--well--that is murder, isn't it? It's just nothing but murder, even if the boy was black. Oh, Parnell! Parnell!³⁴

In spite of this realization, Jo lies during the trial in order to save her husband.³⁵

³³Eckman, pp. 232-233.

³⁴Baldwin, Blues for Mr. Charlie, p. 65.

³⁵Ibid., p. 84.

Baldwin, in "Notes for Blues," writes that Lyle cannot admit his moral weakness because he cannot bear the guilt.

Something in the man knows -- must know -- that what he is doing is evil; but in order to accept the knowledge the man would have to change. What is ghastly and really almost hopeless in our racial situation now is that the crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this knowledge would lead, literally, to madness. The human being, then, in order to protect himself, closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe.³⁶

Just as Baldwin considers hatred to be a form of the attitude of superiority, he also treats paternalism as another form of the same attitude. In the essay, "Nobody Knows My Name," he describes the paternalism of some white Southerners, who recall that Negroes and whites have loved each other for many years. Although Baldwin does not doubt the sincerity of this profession, he believes that this type of protective love, analogous to a father's love for his child, is as debasing to a black person as is hatred. "Men do not like to be protected, it emasculates them. . . . It is not a pretty thing to be a father and be ultimately dependent on the power and kindness of some other man for the well-being of your house."³⁷ One sees how a black man can lose his masculine pride if he is treated as a child, especially in a society which conceives a man's role to be that

³⁶Baldwin, "Notes for Blues," p. xiv.

³⁷Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," p. 99.

of provider, protector, and decision maker. Baldwin further describes the effect of paternalism as he tells of his encounter with an old black man who directed him into his first segregated bus.

His eyes seemed to say that what I was feeling, he had been feeling, at much higher pressure, all his life. But my eyes would never see the hell his eyes had seen. And this hell was, simply, that he had never in his life owned anything, not his wife, not his house, not his child, which could not at any instant be taken from him by the power of white people. This is what paternalism means. And for the rest of the time that I was in the South I watched the eyes of old black men.³⁸

Often the paternalistic person is the Southern liberal. Parnell James, of Blues for Mr. Charlie, reacts to Negroes in this manner. In telling Jo Britten of a Negro girl whom he had loved, Parnell recalls that he wanted to hold her in his arms and "protect her from all those other people who wanted to destroy her."³⁹ He also responds to the people in blacktown as if he were their guardian. He sympathizes with them at the news of Richard's death and goes to some trouble to arrange a trial, yet he rather enjoys his position as champion of justice. He assumes that he knows what is best for the black people and advises that Reverend Meridian Henry encourage his people to remain passive, presumably until white men change their attitudes.⁴⁰

³⁸Ibid., p. 95.

³⁹Baldwin, Blues for Mister Charlie, p. 63.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 39.

For several reasons, Parnell reveals his attitude of superiority through paternalism instead of through hatred. Because he has always been rich, he has not been threatened economically by black people. Having enjoyed a relatively high social status, he does not allow social taboos to prevent him from associating with Negroes. In fact, he seems to take pleasure in shocking Lyle's friends with his views on race. The moral pride which he takes in condemning them for their bigotry helps him avoid examination of his own true feelings about black people.⁴¹ He is unable to see that his paternalism is just as damaging to black people as open hostility is.

Liberals, however, are not the only paternalistic Southerners. Many people who hate the black race as a whole profess to love particular individuals. Usually the beloved Negroes are those who have proved their devotion to the white person. As Hazel, one of Lyle's friends, describes her family's maid, her tone is condescending.

I'm so glad Esther's not here to see this. She'd die of shame. She was the sweetest colored woman --you remember her. She just about raised us, used to sing us to sleep at night, and she could just tell the most beautiful stories -- the kind of stories that could scare you and make you laugh and make you cry, you know? Oh she was wonderful. I don't remember a cross word or an evil expression all the time she was with us. She was always the same. And I believe she knew

⁴¹Ibid., p. 56.

more about me than my own mother and father knew. I just told her everything. Then, one of her sons got killed --he went bad, just like this boy they are having a funeral for here tonight-- and she got sick. I nursed her, I bathed that woman's body with my own hands. And she told me once, she said, "Miss Hazel, you are just like an angel of light." She said, "My own couldn't have done more for me than you have done." She was a wonderful old woman.⁴²

Having lived in Harlem all of his life, Baldwin has had experience with the attitude of superiority in the North. In his essays, "East River, Downtown," "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," "The Harlem Ghetto," "Notes of a Native Son," and "Down at the Cross," Baldwin records his personal observations of the evidence, causes, and effects of this attitude, which is less obvious in the North than in the South.

A subtle reflection of the attitude of white superiority is seen in the area of education. Because of unofficial segregation, most schools which black children attend are substandard. Perhaps even more important than the quality of education, though, is the nature of the subject matter. In nearly all subjects, the accomplishments of white men are stressed, and the heritage of black men is ignored. Baldwin remembers that as a child, he was taught to be ashamed of Africa. He was told that "Africa had never contributed 'anything' to civilization."⁴³ This type of education results

⁴²Ibid., p. 50.

⁴³Baldwin, "East River, Downtown," p. 72.

in reinforcing the Negro's image of himself as an inferior being.

That white people feel they have the right to control the lives of black people is proved by the existence of the ghetto. Although laws do not prevent Negroes from moving out of Harlem, social usage makes the move almost impossible. The controls of the white world are inescapable in Harlem. The cheerless housing projects and the oppressive policemen are especially hated by ghetto residents. "The people in Harlem know they are living there because white people do not think they are good enough to live anywhere else."⁴⁴

A person living in the ghetto becomes frustrated to the point of desperation when he recognizes the possibilities for his future. The majority of residents can choose between performing menial tasks for low wages, entering a life of crime, becoming a Negro leader, moving to a more exclusive ghetto, escaping into the church, or giving up. In describing those people who go to work for the white man each day, Baldwin says,

They struggle to instill in their children some private sense of honor or dignity which will help the child to survive. This means, of course, that they must struggle stolidly, incessantly, to keep this sense alive in themselves, in spite of the insults, the indifference, and the cruelty they are certain to encounter in their working day. They patiently browbeat the landlord into fixing the heat, the plaster, the plumbing. . . .

⁴⁴Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," p. 61.

Such frustration, so long endured, is driving many strong, admirable men and women whose only crime is color to the very gates of paranoia.⁴⁵

Upon realizing the controls and limits upon his life, the black man is outraged. Baldwin writes that "there is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood. . . ."⁴⁶ This deep emotion is often self-destructive, leading a person to drug addiction, insanity, or suicide. Sometimes the person finds it impossible to control the rage and becomes violent. In effort to explain the Harlem riots of 1943, Baldwin says,

To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need. Most of the time it is the members of the ghetto who smash each other, and themselves. But as long as the ghetto walls are standing there will always come a moment when these outlets do not work.⁴⁷

Baldwin believes that the white Northerner who feels superior reacts to the Negro by trying to ignore him. He is rarely personally involved with the black person and does not think of him except as a sexual menace. The white Northerner is able to forget about the black person because he lives in a different part of the city.⁴⁸ When a white person does see a Negro, he rarely recognizes him as an

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 57.

⁴⁶Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," p. 94.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 111.

⁴⁸Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," p. 65.

individual; instead, he calls to mind the image which he has of the whole race. He thinks of the black person in terms of problems, statistics, and injustices, but he does not recognize the fact that a Negro is a human being.⁴⁹

Baldwin feels that Northerners are hypocritical in proclaiming their moral superiority over the South. They imagine that they have freed the Negro and are therefore absolved of responsibility. They deplore the treatment of black people in the South but assume that the people in the ghettos are perfectly happy.⁵⁰ The many black people who have migrated to the North in the hope of a better life, however, have found little improvement there. The North promises more but does not keep its promises. Baldwin made a prophecy in 1959 which has been partially fulfilled.

When a race riot occurs in Atlanta, it will not merely spread to Birmingham . . . (Birmingham is a doomed city). The trouble will spread to every metropolitan center in the nation which has a significant Negro population. And this is not only because the ties between Northern and Southern Negroes are still very close. It is because the nation, the entire nation, has spent a hundred years avoiding the question of the place of the black man in it.⁵¹

Whether by hating the Negro, patronizing him, or ignoring him, white Americans evade the humanity of the black man and

⁴⁹Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," Notes of a Native Son, p. 25.

⁵⁰Baldwin, "East River, Downtown," p. 68.

⁵¹Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name," p. 98.

assume superiority. Baldwin is not merely condemning the white man as an oppressor and glorifying the mistreated black man; instead, he is concerned that the attitude of superiority is also damaging to the white man. The white person will not be free until he examines his own life to determine why he needs to dehumanize someone else.

It is a terrible, an inexorable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own: in the face of one's victim, one sees oneself. Walk through the streets of Harlem and see what we, this nation, have become.⁵²

⁵²Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown," p. 66.

CHAPTER III

THE WHITE PERSON'S ATTITUDE OF INNOCENCE

The other large general attitude frequently taken by white Americans is characterized or designated by Baldwin as that of innocence.¹ Innocence is usually regarded as a state rather than an attitude; but that is not the way Baldwin considers the matter. He seems to feel that innocence of white racism is assumed unjustifiably by some whites, and what he means by innocence is really assumed innocence. He defines and illustrates this attitude, and examines particularly under this classification the stance taken by white liberals toward black people. He comments upon the need for an admission of guilt by all American whites, and then considers this assumed innocence of prejudice in its relationship to a larger assumed innocence which might be described more simply as a refusal to see and face unpleasant realities.

First of all, Baldwin considers the white person's innocence of racial persecution to be an illusion. He declares that all white people (or their ancestors) have been guilty of such offenses against the black person as enslaving him,

¹Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 19.

defining him as "three fifths"² of a man, lynching him, causing him to live in poverty, forbidding him to choose where he will reside, depriving him of political power, denying him justice in the courts, and--worst of all--controlling his mind by convincing him of his own inferiority.³ But in spite of this pervasive, collective guilt, many whites continue to act as if they are not to be blamed; furthermore, they willfully remain ignorant of the offenses committed on racial bases.⁴

If the attitude of innocence is an illusion, Baldwin infers, it is also a crime. The letter to his nephew contains the following indictment of white Americans:

I know what the world has done to my brother, and how narrowly he has survived it. And I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. . . . But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.⁵

By persisting in their attitude of innocence, white people have been dishonest with themselves; they have negated the possibility

²Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 98.

³Ibid.

⁴Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," p. 166.

⁵Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," p. 19.

of seriously asking themselves why it has been necessary for white people to control the lives of Negroes for 300 years. Unless people admit their guilt, it will be impossible to bring about the necessary changes in the racial situation.⁶

During Baldwin's visit to the South, white people demonstrated their ignorance of the conditions in which black people were living by frequently telling Baldwin that "race relations" in their towns were excellent. They probably meant that Negroes in the area had not participated in any demonstrations. Baldwin never found a black person who agreed with this assessment. In the essay, "A Fly in Buttermilk," Baldwin describes his interview with the white principal of a school which had recently admitted one black student. This man could not understand why the child, G., wanted to attend a white school. He refused to believe that G. was literally risking his life to get an education which would allow him to rise above his environment. Instead, the well-meaning principal continued to believe that G. could have received an equally good education in a segregated school for Negroes.⁷ It is rarely possible, of course, for a child to become well educated in such schools, which usually have poorly prepared teachers, inadequate facilities, and a curriculum which reinforces the black child's negative self image.⁸

⁶Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 117.

⁷Baldwin, "A Fly in Buttermilk," p. 85.

⁸Ibid., p. 80.

Baldwin says that the white person demonstrates, by his reaction to racial disturbance, his unwillingness to know how the black person lives. The explosion of a ghetto is often greeted with surprise and shock on the part of whites. The white community may respond to the disturbance by stationing more policemen in the ghetto, by making token gestures such as building a housing project in the area, or by blaming the trouble on "agitators."⁹ Baldwin interprets these responses as ways in which whites avoid examining why the violence occurred. He feels that white people do not want to know that their own racism has caused black people to live in the unbearable conditions which lead to rioting.¹⁰

Baldwin reiterates his contention when he writes about the response to the rioting of black spectators in the United Nations after the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. Most white people were shocked and blamed the communists instead of trying to determine the real cause of the trouble. Baldwin himself was distressed that white people thought Negroes were completely satisfied with their lives and could be stirred up only by communists:

I find this view amazing. It is a view which even a minimal effort at observation would immediately contradict. One has only, for example, to walk through Harlem and ask oneself two questions. The first question is: Would I like to live here?

⁹Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto," p. 58.

¹⁰Baldwin, "East River, Downtown," p. 68.

And the second question is: Why don't those who now live here move out? The answer to both questions is immediately obvious.¹¹

The people who are criticized most harshly by Baldwin for their innocence are the white liberals. Baldwin charges that, although liberals are aware that Negroes have been treated unjustly, they do not know of the extent of the injuries and are unwilling to find out.¹² They try to protect themselves from the knowledge of the suffering of black people by holding them at a distance. They think of Negroes as victims or problems, but not as human beings. The white liberals' declarations of good intentions are too often substituted for action. The fact that promises are rarely implemented is an indication to Baldwin that these promises are made primarily to salve the liberals' nagging consciences.¹³

Baldwin further charges that white liberals, who pride themselves on good will, do not even know that they, like the members of the Ku Klux Klan, are racists. Their attitude of superiority is evident in their missionary spirit, based on the assumption that, "the black man, to become truly human and acceptable, must first become like the white man."¹⁴ Liberals often fail to realize the value of the unique personal experience

¹¹Baldwin, "East River, Downtown," p. 68.

¹²Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 72.

¹³Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," p. 25.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 45.

and cultural heritage of the black American. These well-meaning men believe that Negroes want to imitate the white manner of life. Baldwin, however, asserts that an increasing number of black people recognize the hypocrisy and moral decay of white society and have no desire to become like white men. He recalls one prominent Negro's remark, "I am not at all sure that I want to be integrated into a burning house."¹⁵ Another states, "I might consider being integrated into something else, an American society more real and more honest-- but this? No thank you, man, who needs it?"¹⁶

White liberals, according to Baldwin, do not want to know that they feel superior to the black man. In effort to avoid this knowledge, they profess noble ideals of justice and equality, sentimentally pretending to ignore all racial differences--to be "color blind." These people are rarely able to admit that they harbor any hostility toward the black man because such an admission would destroy their sense of self-righteousness. Although liberals blame the overt white racists for America's racial problems, Baldwin considers these same liberals even more detrimental to the black person's struggle for freedom.¹⁷ They have held out the hope of a better life to black people through their avowals of

¹⁵Baldwin, "East River, Downtown," p. 71.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Eckman, p. 217.

brotherhood, but he feels that they have risked little to make this hope materialize.¹⁸

Baldwin says that white people of various philosophical and political persuasions willfully maintain their attitudes of innocence. Although they must know, at least subconsciously, that they share the blame for the position of black people, they do not want to admit their guilt. Baldwin insists, however, that admission of guilt is necessary if members of different races are ever to have an honest relationship with each other.¹⁹ He points out in the following parable the impossibility of such a relationship if two people cannot risk telling the truth:

. . . I have a friend who has just murdered his mother and put her in the closet and I know it, but we're not going to talk about it. Now this means very shortly since, after all, I know the corpse is in the closet, and he knows I know it, and we're sitting around having a few drinks and trying to be buddy-buddy together, that very shortly, we can't talk about anything because we can't talk about that. No matter what I say I may inadvertently stumble on this corpse.²⁰

Although Baldwin emphasizes the necessity for the white man to admit his guilt for the maltreatment of the black man, it is important to note that Baldwin does not contend that the black man is innocent. Instead, Baldwin says that all

¹⁸Baldwin, "East River, Downtown," p. 70.

¹⁹Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," pp. 166, 175.

²⁰Baldwin, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," p. 124.

men are guilty because they are basically bad and will always harm each other. He feels that it is important for men to recognize their nature and to realize that they have contributed to the suffering in the world.²¹ Baldwin calls attention to one particular area of life in which white Americans have done harm. He wants them to be fully aware that they have wronged black people in their country. Baldwin is never specific, however, about how black people are guilty in their relationships with whites.

Baldwin says that the innocent attitude of white people toward Negroes is part of a larger false and assumed innocence. The treatment of black people in this country is only one thing that Americans do not want to face. In addition, they do not want to examine their personal attitudes and values, they do not want to examine the beliefs and actions of the nation, and they do not want to face the reality that every person will die one day. If Americans could face unpleasant realities such as these, they might be able to face the way in which America deals with black people.²²

James Baldwin most fully examines the attitude of innocence in Another Country, a novel about the relationships of a group of people living in New York City. Rufus Scott, a central figure, was a black drummer who became involved with

²¹Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," p. 45.

²²Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 105.

a Southern white girl named Leona. He humiliated and abused her until she went mad. Rufus disappeared into the streets for a month, returned, and upon failing to establish contact with any of his friends, committed suicide. After his death, his best friend, Vivaldo Moore, began to see Rufus' sister Ida. Their circle of friends included Richard Silenski, a writer of mystery stories; Richard's wife, Cass; and Eric Jones, an actor who was also a homosexual. These people, in their relationships, tried desperately to bridge the gaps which exist between all human beings. Baldwin explores the human qualities isolating these people from each other and concentrates especially on the barriers existing between individuals of different races. The black person's rage and the white person's innocence are two attitudes which prevent individuals of different races from relating honestly to each other. Baldwin makes a particular point of showing the false innocence displayed by the white characters in Another Country.

Vivaldo, the person most conspicuous for his attitude of innocence, revealed this attitude in his relationship with Rufus. In spite of the fact that Rufus and Vivaldo were friends, there was much about the experience of black people with the white world that Vivaldo did not know. One night when the two friends went out together, Vivaldo was injured in a brawl and wanted Rufus to take him to a hospital. Rufus knew that if he did so, he would be accused of beating Vivaldo.

In spite of Vivaldo's protest that such a thing could not happen, Rufus insisted that Vivaldo's girl friend take him. Vivaldo did not want to hear about this kind of behavior of white Americans and never believed Rufus' fear to be well grounded.²³

Like Vivaldo, Richard and Cass Silenski also assumed innocence. Ida, Rufus' sister, went to the Silenski's house looking for her brother after he had been away for several weeks. Richard would not believe her assurance that the police would not find Rufus.

"Have you been to the police?" Richard asked. "Yes." She made a gesture of disgust and rose and walked to the window. "They said it happens all the time--colored men running off from their families. They said they'd try to find him. But they don't care. They don't care what happens--to a black man."

"Oh, well, now," cried Richard, his face red, "is that fair? I mean, hell, I'm sure they'll look for him just like they look for any other citizen of this city."

She looked at him. "How would you know? I do know--know what I'm talking about. I say they don't care--and they don't care."

"I don't think you should look at it like that."²⁴

Vivaldo, in another situation, demonstrated his unwillingness to know about the mental and physical anguish which Rufus had endured. When Rufus finally came to see him, after being gone for a month, Vivaldo was genuinely relieved and was angry

²³Baldwin, Another Country (New York, 1960), p. 35.

²⁴Ibid., p. 101.

that Rufus had imagined no one would care to see him. Rufus told of wandering around in the streets, sleeping in subways, halls, and movies for fear that friends would condemn him for his treatment of Leona. As Rufus talked about how he had driven Leona insane even though he loved her, he revealed his desperation. Vivaldo, knowing that Rufus needed friendship, grew tired of listening to the story and suggested that they go to a jazz bar.²⁵ When Vivaldo met a girl in the bar, he forgot all about Rufus.²⁶ Soon afterwards, Rufus walked to George Washington Bridge and jumped off.²⁷ Vivaldo was overcome with sorrow at the news of the suicide. On the way to the funeral, he told Cass that he had gone to Ida's house to try to comfort her. He was hurt and surprised at her family's looks of accusation, and wanted to declare that he had loved Rufus and had had no part in his death. At every mention of the dead man's name in the following months, Vivaldo testified, as if to profess his innocence, that he had loved Rufus.²⁸

When the Silenskis learned of Rufus' death, they too were amazed. Cass, in bewilderment, asked Richard if there were anything they could have done. She felt a pang of guilt that she had not been more of a friend to Rufus. Richard,

²⁵Ibid., p. 71.

²⁶Ibid., p. 82.

²⁷Ibid., p. 88.

²⁸Ibid., p. 113.

however, was quite sure that nothing they could have done would have made any difference. He assured Cass that Rufus had already ruined himself and that no one could have stopped him from jumping.²⁹

After Rufus' death Vivaldo began to see Ida and soon fell in love with her. At times Vivaldo felt that Ida hated him, but he could not understand why. He would have been happy to ignore racial differences, but Ida never let him forget the color of his skin.³⁰ Although Vivaldo could not openly admit that he shared any guilt for Rufus' death, he did feel that he should have been more responsive to his friend. While talking to Eric Jones months after the suicide, Vivaldo confided his feeling that he might have saved Rufus by reaching out, holding the black man in his arms, and comforting him. He had not risked this gesture, however, for fear that Rufus would interpret it as a sexual advance.³¹

Ida knew that she and Vivaldo could not have an honest relationship as long as Vivaldo retained his assumed innocence. She told Cass that even though she had been miles away from Rufus, she had known he was dying, but Vivaldo, who was close to him, did not know it. In response to Cass' protest that Ida's knowledge changed nothing, Ida answered, "Maybe nothing can be stopped or changed, but you've got to know, you've got

²⁹Ibid., p. 105.

³⁰Ibid., p. 262.

³¹Ibid., p. 342.

to know what's happening."³² She said to Cass, "Vivaldo didn't want to know my brother was dying because he doesn't want to know that my brother would still be alive if he hadn't been born black."³³

Ida made it clear that she wanted Cass, as well as Vivaldo, to "pay her dues,"³⁴ to become fully conscious of the suffering of black people. At the same time, she stated that a white person could never understand the past experience of a black person. Ida confirmed the slow admission by Cass that she had no right to deny that Rufus died because he was black; Ida told Cass, ". . . there's no way in the world for you to know what Rufus went through, not in this world, not as long as you're white."³⁵

As Ida and Vivaldo continued to live together, their relationship became increasingly destructive. The black girl, driven by bitterness, always tried to make the white boy pay for his color. Contrary to her intentions, however, she began to love him. When she told him of this realization, he was both happy and terrified. He was afraid to hear what else Ida had to say, but he knew that he could no longer shield himself from the truth. Ida began to tell him about herself.

³²Ibid., p. 347.

³³Ibid., p. 351.

³⁴Ibid., p. 350.

³⁵Ibid., p. 351.

"When Rufus died, something happened to me," she said. She sounded now very quiet and weary, as though she were telling someone else's story; also, as though she herself, with a faint astonishment, were hearing it for the first time. But it was yet more astonishing that he now began to listen to a story he had always known, but never dared believe. "I can't explain it. Rufus had always been the world to me. I loved him."

"So did I," he said--too quickly, irrelevantly; and for the first time it occurred to him that, possibly, he was a liar; had never loved Rufus at all, but had only feared and envied him.

"I don't need your credentials, Vivaldo," she said.³⁶

Ida continued her story, emphasizing that she had loved Rufus and had known him as his white friends had never known him. She had depended on him to lift her out of her surroundings, and when he died, she felt that she had been robbed of her hope "by a group of people too cowardly even to know what they had done."³⁷ She had determined to pay back the white world, making every white person suffer as much as possible. She had also decided that she would rise in the world by any possible means. In order to have a successful singing career, Ida confessed, she had sold herself to her manager, Ellis. This prostitution had only increased her contempt for herself and for Vivaldo. She told him that she had hated him for pretending to believe the excuses she had offered for staying out late and accused him of being afraid to know of her prostitution because he had not wanted to know what was

³⁶Ibid., p. 413.

³⁷Ibid., p. 417.

happening to her. She told him that if he had demanded the truth, he would have freed them both from pretense.³⁸

Vivaldo was thoroughly shaken upon hearing Ida's story, and his feelings toward her were ambivalent. His assumed innocence destroyed, he did not know how he would live with the truth. After crying for a long while, Vivaldo rose, and began to work at his desk. Although he was uncertain about his future with Ida, he did not seem to be crushed by the knowledge thrust upon him. His fresh beginning was an indication, instead, that he was moving into the future with a new consciousness of his own ability to accept reality.³⁹

James Baldwin, in Another Country, has treated harshly the white people who assume innocence. He makes it clear that he considers each white person to be guilty for the white race's abuse of the black race. Although he is severe with the white people, he also seems to care for them. He refuses to let Vivaldo maintain his innocence, but he also shows concern for Vivaldo's mental torture resulting from the white man's unsatisfactory relationships with Rufus and Ida. In the following passage, Rufus and Vivaldo attempt to communicate after Rufus has expressed hatred toward the entire white world, including Vivaldo.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 417-427.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 427-431.

"I just want to be your friend," said Vivaldo. "That's all. But you don't want any friends, do you?"

"Yes, I do," said Rufus, quietly. "Yes, I do." He paused; then slowly, with great difficulty, "Don't mind me. I know you're the only friend I've got left in the world, Vivaldo."

And that's why you hate me, Vivaldo thought, feeling still and helpless and sad.⁴⁰

Baldwin apparently sympathizes with Vivaldo's confusion and distress in the face of Rufus' hostility.

Another Country is an affront to the white reader. Some critics regard this book as an expression of bitterness on the part of Baldwin, written simply because of his need to blame someone for his personal problems. For instance, Charles Nichols, writing in Commentary, suggests that Baldwin is motivated by his race hatred.⁴¹ There is no doubt that Baldwin intends to offend his white readers, but it seems possible that his motivation is not hatred, but a sense of responsibility toward them. He wants the white people to change their harmful racial attitudes, not only for the sake of the black Americans but for the sake of white Americans as well, and he believes that this change can occur only when a person sees himself as he really is.⁴² In discussing his role as a writer, Baldwin says,

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 70.

⁴¹Charles Nichols, "The New Calvinism," Commentary, XXIII (January, 1957), 96.

⁴²Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," p. 24.

. . . I think we writers do have a responsibility, not only to ourselves and to our own time, but to those who are coming after us. . . . And I suppose that this responsibility can only be discharged by dealing as truthfully as we know how with our present fortunes, these present days.⁴³

Baldwin deems it necessary to write about even the most unpleasant emotions and actions in his effort to tell the truth, as he sees it, about life.

⁴³Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," p. 199.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

James Baldwin's presentation of the white person's racial attitudes of superiority and innocence has been a shock and an affront to many of his white readers. Baldwin has, in effect, delivered a moral indictment to white Americans, emphasizing the harmfulness of their attitudes to black people as well as to themselves. An attempt will be made in conclusion first to consider Baldwin's ideas about changing these attitudes, second to judge the accuracy of Baldwin's presentation, and third to assess the value of his work for the society to which he has addressed himself.

Baldwin gives attention to the matter of changing attitudes in his latest volume of essays, The Fire Next Time. Occasionally, he seems very pessimistic about the possibility of improving the relationship between whites and blacks in America. He exhibits this foreboding as he recalls a conversation with Elijah Muhammed of the Black Muslims, a group which seeks revenge against the "white devils" for their maltreatment of the black race. After this interview, Baldwin was alarmed at Elijah's belief that it is already too late for the white person to change his attitudes:

Elijah . . . indicated, skeptically, that I might have white friends, or think I did, and they might be trying to be decent--now--but their time was up. It was almost as though he were saying, "They had their chance, man, and they goofed!"¹

Baldwin felt inclined to defend his few white friends that he loved and trusted against Elijah's assertion that all white men were hopelessly damned, yet he could think of only a few white people who deserved defense. Baldwin realized fearfully that Elijah Muhammed could be right.

Again revealing the fear that it might be too late for white people to change their attitudes, Baldwin says that during World War II, Negroes lost hope that white Americans had consciences. He categorizes the humiliations to which Negroes in uniform were subjected and describes the despair that soldiers felt upon returning to the United States where they were told to "wait." He describes the black person's change in attitude toward whites.

The subtle and deadly change of heart that might occur in you would be involved with the realization that a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked but only that they be spineless.²

Even if it is not too late, Baldwin does not know whether white Americans have the will to change their attitude of racial superiority. He says that in the past, they have been

¹Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 86.

²Ibid., p. 69.

unwilling to risk examination of themselves and of the American dream because they have been anxious to guard their dominant economic and cultural position. He suggests that the bondage of Americans to illusions, such as racial superiority, indicates a spiritual sickness.³

Baldwin not only doubts that whites have the will to examine their attitudes; he is, occasionally, unsure that people can change their views even if they want to. He is vague, for instance, about whether or not the white man can ever lose his assumed innocence. On one hand, he insists that the white person become fully aware of what the black man has endured. On the other hand, he declares that the white person can never fully understand the black person's suffering, simply because he has never been in the Negro's skin. For instance, in Another Country, Ida tells Cass that white people have to "pay their dues," which means that they must know about the experience of black people. Furthermore, whites must realize that they share the guilt for this experience. In the same conversation, though, Ida also says that Cass can never know what Rufus has been through because the white girl has never been black.⁴

Despite all the pessimistic doubt, James Baldwin nevertheless affirms that it will be possible for whites to adopt

³Ibid., p. 103.

⁴Baldwin, Another Country, p. 351.

a different stance toward blacks, but that the change will be difficult. The difficulty stems from the nature of man. Baldwin's novels convey the impression that he does not believe in the innate goodness of man; instead, he seems to believe that men are basically evil and will always continue to harm each other. In Another Country, Cass finally comes to realize that she, like every other person, has contributed to the suffering in the world because of her basic nature. She tells Eric,

You begin to see that you yourself, innocent, upright you, have contributed and do contribute to the misery of the world. Which will never end because we're what we are.⁵

In spite of his assessment that man has no hope of achieving permanent happiness, Baldwin repeatedly insists that men can be "better than they are."⁶ He ends some of his early essays, which offer a penetrating criticism of society, on a note of affirmation. For instance, in "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," he voices faith that Americans are capable of examining their lives, realizing their responsibility to each other, and rising to the task of reshaping their nation.⁷ He gives a similar assurance in the essay, "In Search of a Majority," stating that people are capable of reassessing the past and creating standards to live by in the present. He

⁵Ibid., p. 405.

⁶Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 105.

⁷Baldwin, "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," p. 126.

issues a challenge to his readers. "The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in."⁸

Baldwin, in The Fire Next Time, gives fullest statement to the idea that people can create a better world if they can first achieve an understanding of themselves as people who are responsible to the world. The necessity to achieve this understanding is the necessity to recover the spiritual part of life. Baldwin says that a person needs to regain "fruitful communion with the depths of his own being:"⁹ to find out who he is, what significance his life has, what his relationship to other people should be, and what he should do with his life. Baldwin thinks that, in order to achieve a meaningful self-understanding, a person must face the reality of death and the tragedy of life, assume responsibility toward human beings, free himself from illusions, accept himself and others, and realize that men are interdependent. This total change in a person's world view would enable him to change his racial attitudes also.

Baldwin believes that one begins to live consciously when he realizes that he is going to die. Baldwin's thinking at this point is very similar to that of Albert Camus, who more clearly elaborates the idea that acknowledging the reality

⁸Baldwin, "In Search of a Majority," p. 114.

⁹Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 111.

and finality of death forces man to make a decision about the significance of his life. In The Myth of Sisyphus, Camus says that a person's admission that he will die one day, that he is finite, is accompanied by the realization that anything a man can do is ultimately meaningless. One can react to the knowledge of this reality by attempting to escape, by embracing nihilism, or by affirming life and creating positive values. Camus chooses to make the affirmation that life is worth living, even though death is certain and life is ultimately meaningless.¹⁰ James Baldwin also makes this choice, stating that the admission of the inevitability of death enables man to confront "with passion the conundrum of life."¹¹

Baldwin thinks that the awareness of one's own mortality makes a person conscious of his responsibility to himself and to other men. Although each person will only live for a short while, he should strive to create a better world for the next generation. Baldwin says more about man's responsibility:

It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant--birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so--and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths--change in the sense of renewal. But renewal becomes impossible if one supposes things to be

¹⁰Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, p. 39.

¹¹Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 106.

constant that are not--safety, for example, or money, or power. One clings then to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope--the entire possibility--of freedom disappears.¹²

A man must try to discard harmful illusions about himself and about his country. The attitudes that a white person is racially superior and that he is innocent are only two such illusions. Equally damaging are beliefs that social status and money will bring happiness, that the American dream of freedom and equality is a reality, and that America must protect the free world from the communist menace.¹³ Myths such as these prevent a person from discerning reality, and the discernment is necessary in order to live an increasingly full and productive life.

Man must also be able to love himself, according to Baldwin, before he can love others. The type of love which Baldwin refers to is not sentimental, but comprehensive.

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace--not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.¹⁴

A person must be able to see himself as he is, admit his guilt, and accept himself. Baldwin says that if white people can

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 109.

learn to love themselves, they will not need to look down upon black people.¹⁵

In addition to loving themselves, men must love each other because they are interdependent. Baldwin stresses that black people and white people in America especially need each other. The Negro, who has seen the white man at his worst, can tell him a great deal about himself. The white person needs this judgment in order to see himself as he really is, in order to be released from the bondage of his illusions.¹⁶ On the other hand, the white person has political and economic power which the black man needs in order to be self-determining.

Baldwin says that the black person "is the key figure in his country, and the American future is precisely as bright or as dark as his."¹⁷ The black person can bring about the growth or the destruction of America. The country can become great if the presence of the Negro forces white Americans to re-examine their attitudes, and to accept responsibility for fellow human beings. On the other hand, the country can be destroyed if white people continue to maintain illusions about the situation of the black person and about the deeper realities of life. Baldwin writes, "A bill is coming in that I fear America is not prepared to pay."¹⁸ He refers to the

¹⁵Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 117.

fact that the nation may soon be called to account by the black people of the world, who outnumber the white people. Baldwin predicts that if white men continue to deny black men the right to live in human dignity, white America will make vengeance inevitable. Baldwin closes The Fire Next Time with a plea for people to prevent this vengeance.

Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we-- and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist, on, or create, the consciousness of the others--do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!¹⁹

The accuracy of Baldwin's presentation of the white person's racial attitudes is a judgment especially difficult for a white person to make. He can scarcely deny the truth of Baldwin's assertions because he has never viewed his own racial attitudes from the perspective of a black person. Nevertheless, if the white reader takes Baldwin's writing seriously, he must decide whether or not to accept the justice of Baldwin's indictment.

To this writer, Baldwin's concept of the white person's attitude of superiority appears to be valid, although few

¹⁹Ibid., p. 120.

whites would define superiority as Baldwin does. Most white Americans do not think of themselves as racists because most whites do not show their hatred overtly. Baldwin, however, points out that the white person may also express his feeling of superiority by patronizing or by ignoring the black person. Baldwin demonstrates that racism permeates the political, economic, and cultural institutions of our society. The disclosure of the nature and magnitude of racist thinking may enable some white people to realize that they unwarrantedly have assumed superiority.

Baldwin's analysis of the white man's attitude of innocence as an illusion and as a crime also seems just, generally speaking, although this attitude may not be as widespread as Baldwin seems to believe. Possibly some white people know of the suffering they have caused and simply do not care, and perhaps some people are aware of the effects of white racism, but are ineffectual in their efforts to combat it. The illusion of innocence in white America was particularly apparent, though, after the death of the civil rights leader, Martin Luther King. Many white leaders of the nation, in voicing their sorrow, expressed shock that such a thing could have happened in America. The black people, however, who spoke on national television seldom showed surprise at the killing.²⁰

²⁰Even such moderate civil rights leaders as Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young, in an interview with CBS News Commentator, Dan Rather, April 4, 1968, said that they were not surprised at the assassination of Martin Luther King.

They were well aware that King's death symbolized the racism of the entire society. The concept of innocence as a crime was also illustrated after King was killed. Very few national officials admitted that the murder would not have been committed if the country's treatment of black people had been honorable. Few people expressed the idea that the nation as a whole shared the guilt for this murder. Possibly the fact that expressions of sorrow were usually accompanied by pleas for non-violence revealed a subconscious knowledge that the black community had some cause for anger, but little attention was given to what this cause might be. The failure to admit guilt constituted a crime because, without this admission, new stances toward black people could not be adopted.

Baldwin says little in concrete, specific terms about how he wants whites to act toward blacks. He says that white people must recognize black people as human beings, but he does not give an example of a meaningful relationship between members of different races. He says that white men must act responsibly to prevent the dehumanization of black men, but he gives no indication of what this responsibility entails. It is difficult for the reader to discern just exactly what Baldwin expects of white people.

Baldwin goes far beneath the surface of racial tensions in his understanding that the white man's harmful racial attitudes are part of a larger problem, a spiritual sickness.

Baldwin is vague, however, about whether or not the black person shares this problem. In some instances, he refers to the lack of identity as a problem which extends beyond racial barriers. For instance, when he first went to Europe, he wrote that neither black nor white Americans knew who they were. At other times, however, Baldwin states that Negroes have achieved their identity and suggests that they are spiritually superior to whites. He implies that people who suffer because of their blackness will naturally achieve their identity and that a person can suffer only if he is black.²¹ It seems unrealistic to suggest that a black person is spiritually superior because he has endured racial persecution.

Baldwin is most perceptive in writing about the effects on the black person of the white person's racial posture. He makes the white reader aware of the frustration of being confined to a certain area of town, of not having enough to eat, of not being able to provide for a family; and he communicates forcefully the rage which a black man feels upon realizing that he is powerless. Most importantly, perhaps, Baldwin reveals the despair of the black person who is convinced of his own inferiority. Baldwin is anxious that the white person should know what it is like to be black.

²¹Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 113.

In considering the literary value of Baldwin's work, a student must assess the rhetorical effectiveness, the social importance, and the moral value of Baldwin's presentation of racial attitudes. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the rhetorical skills employed by Baldwin in his effort to persuade the white person to change the attitudes which Baldwin considers to be harmful. In his early, introspective essays; in his graphic creative writing; and in his later tract, apocalyptic in tone, Baldwin has appealed to the reader in more than one way. At times, he uses the rational appeal, as when, reasoning inductively, he cites the numerous ways in which black people are limited by white society, and concludes that black people in America are not yet free.²² In other instances, Baldwin weakens his presentation by generalizing on selected evidence. His primary appeal, however, is not to reason, but to the emotions. As he tries to convey what it is like to be black, as he accuses white people of injustice, as he exhorts his white readers to change their attitudes, Baldwin touches the feelings of his readers. Part of the impact of Baldwin's work stems from his own intense emotional experience. He conveys his feeling effectively in such essays as "Notes of a Native Son" and "Stranger in the Village," where his rage is carefully restrained. In some instances, however, he vents his passion with unhappy

²²Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," p. 21.

results. For instance, in Another Country, the sexual encounters between Ida and Vivaldo are so wild that their only effect is to shock the reader.²³ Baldwin makes his most effective emotional appeals when he creates scenes that enable white readers to see the effects of racism on black people. In "Down at the Cross," for instance, Baldwin evokes a sense of outrage in the reader as he describes an early, humiliating experience with white policemen.

I was thirteen and was crossing Fifth Avenue on my way to the Forty-second Street library, and the cop in the middle of the street muttered as I passed him, "Why don't you niggers stay uptown where you belong?" When I was ten, and didn't look, certainly, any older, two policemen amused themselves with me by frisking me, making comic (and terrifying) speculations concerning my ancestry and probable sexual prowess, and for good measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem's empty lots.²⁴

The work of James Baldwin has value as social criticism.)

This man has made a segment of white Americans aware of what he considers their racial attitudes to be. He has not merely protested against racial injustice, but has tried to determine why people feel and act as they do toward members of another race. Baldwin has also demonstrated that racial problems are an integral part of the general social fabric. He has shown, for instance, the ways in which racial attitudes are reflected through politics, economics, and culture. Most importantly,

²³Baldwin, Another Country, p. 177.

²⁴Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 33.

Baldwin has made the observation that racial tensions, like many other social problems, are caused by a pervasive sickness within the society.

In assessing the moral value of Baldwin's work, one must deal with his purpose in writing as well as with his success in fulfilling this purpose. Many critics do not consider Baldwin's purpose to be essentially moral. They believe that this man, motivated by bitterness, wants to castigate the white world for its crimes. This assessment, however, contradicts Baldwin's own statement of purpose in writing. He states that he feels a sense of responsibility to the society in which he lives.²⁵ James Baldwin considers it his task to portray reality as faithfully as possible in order that men might have a clearer vision of themselves. He wants white people to free themselves from those attitudes which are damaging to themselves as well as to black people, and he believes that this liberation can occur only if people see themselves as they are.²⁶

In his effort to tell the truth about life, James Baldwin has judged white America. He has told white people that they are guilty of denying freedom to black people and has endeavored to help the whites understand their own attitudes. He has tried to enable people to "take off their masks," to free

²⁵Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," p. 199.

²⁶Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," p. 24.

themselves from illusion, and to ask serious questions about their lives. He has challenged the individual to take on responsibility for "ending the racial nightmare"²⁷ and shaping a better world. He emphasizes that the future of the entire country--its growth or its destruction--depends upon the person's willingness to assume this responsibility. Although Baldwin has offended and alienated many of his readers, he has also offered them the possibility of liberation from present attitudes and habits by confronting them with his perception of the truth about life. It remains for the individual reader to decide for himself whether to accept or reject Baldwin's assessment of the white person's racial attitudes. The hope of this writer is that the white readers of Baldwin's essays and novels will bring to their perusal a sense of openness and receptivity. For, like it or not, Baldwin stands today as one of the most eloquent voices raised by the black community.

²⁷Baldwin, "Down at the Cross," p. 120.

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