THIS IS THE ONLY REAL CONCERN OF THE ARTIST, TO RECREATE OUT OF THE DISORDER OF LIFE THAT ORDER WHICH IS ART.

Autobiographical Notes

James Baldwin
James Baldwin felt compelled to write at length about being an African American “because it was the gate I had to unlock before I could hope to write about anything else.” His essays flow from his conviction that a writer’s duty is “to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source.”

One of the most controversial and stirring writers of the twentieth century, James Baldwin was born and raised in New York City’s Harlem, where his stepfather was the minister of a small evangelical church. As a young man, Baldwin read voraciously and served as a junior minister for a few years at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly. At the age of twenty-four, he used funds from a fellowship to move to Europe. While living in Paris, he completed his first—and some say best—novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953). Notes of a Native Son, a collection of autobiographical essays published in 1955, established Baldwin as an American writer of the first rank. The critic Irving Howe said Baldwin was among “the two or three greatest essayists this country has ever produced.”

Although he lived much of his life in France, Baldwin never relinquished his U.S. citizenship, and in later years he traveled back to his homeland so often that he considered himself a transatlantic commuter. While abroad, he wrote in a variety of forms, including novels, plays, essays, poetry, and book reviews. Two of Baldwin’s plays, The Amen Corner (1955) and Blues for Mister Charlie (1964), were produced on Broadway.

In the 1950s, the decade that witnessed the early growth of the American civil rights movement, Baldwin’s audacious, searing scrutiny of racial injustice played a major role in forcing leaders, black and white, to come to terms with one of the nation’s most anguishing problems—the treatment of African Americans. He saw himself as a “disturber of the peace,” and some chided him for his unrelenting criticism. For instance, Benjamin DeMott wrote in the Saturday Review, “To function as a voice of outrage month after month for a decade and more strains heart and mind, and rhetoric as well; the consequence is a writing style ever on the edge of being winded by too many summonses to intensity.”

In the early sixties, Baldwin’s reputation grew with the publication of additional essays, Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son (1961) and The Fire Next Time (1963), a groundbreaking book on race relations that had wide influence. He later published several novels, participated in TV documentaries, and remained a prominent, humane advocate of racial justice in American life.

At the time of his death in France, Baldwin was working on a biography of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Soon after Baldwin died, two noted African American writers praised his lifework. Orde Coombs wrote, “Because he existed we felt that the racial miasma that swirled around us would not consume us, and it is not too much to say that this man saved our lives.” Juan Williams of The Washington Post said, “America and the literary world are far richer for [Baldwin’s] witness. The proof of a shared humanity across the divides of race, class, and more is the testament that the preacher’s son, James Arthur Baldwin, has left us.”
Before You Read

Autobiographical Notes

Make the Connection
The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates believed that only an examined life is worth living. What exactly does it mean to live an examined life? At the least it means stepping back from the whirl of daily activities and gaining some perspective on who you are, where you have been, and where you are heading. It means creating new angles of vision, asking questions, proposing answers. It means making self-assessment a part of self-creation. As you will see, James Baldwin certainly took Socrates’ words to heart. The autobiographical notes that follow first appeared as a preface to Baldwin’s acclaimed Notes of a Native Son.

Literary Focus
Tone
Since Baldwin is writing his autobiography, his main subject is himself and his life experience. Therefore, when we speak of his tone, we mean his attitude toward himself and the world in which he lived. We sense that attitude by the words he chooses and by the style or manner in which he arranges those words. Tone can often be summed up in a single adjective, such as ironic or light-hearted; the way in which that tone is achieved must be examined by detailed analysis.

The tone of a literary work is the attitude the writer takes toward the subject and the audience.
For more on Tone, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.

Reading Skills
Evaluating an Author’s Arguments
In this essay, Baldwin assesses his life experience. He tells us what conclusions he has drawn about a number of important subjects, such as the racial divide in American society and the dilemma of the African American writer. Often, he explicitly states his beliefs and gives reasons for his assertions. As you read, jot down statements that reveal Baldwin’s beliefs and the reasons he gives for making those assertions. After you read, think about your own responses to Baldwin’s text. What assertions will you make about Baldwin’s beliefs?

Vocabulary Development
bleak adj.: cheerless.
censored (sen’sard) v.: cut or changed to remove material deemed objectionable.
assess (ə·ses’) v.: evaluate; judge the value of.
conundrum (ka·nun’drəm) n.: riddle.
coherent (kō·hir’ant) adj.: clear; logical, and consistent.
crucial (krū’chal) adj.: critical; decisive.
interloper (in’tər·lō’pər) n.: intruder; meddler.
appropriate (ə·prō’prē·āt’) v.: take over.
explicit (eks·plis’it) adj.: clear; definite.
pulverized (pul’vər·izd’) v.: crushed; destroyed.

James Baldwin  1111
I was born in Harlem thirty-one years ago. I began plotting novels at about the time I learned to read. The story of my childhood is the usual bleak fantasy, and we can dismiss it with the restrained observation that I certainly would not consider living it again. In those days my mother was given to the exasperating\(^1\) and mysterious habit of having babies. As they were born, I took them over with one hand and held a book with the other. The children probably suffered, though they have since been kind enough to deny it, and in this way I read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *A Tale of Two Cities* over and over and over again; in this way, in fact, I read just about everything I could get my hands on—except the Bible, probably because it was the only book I was encouraged to read. I must also confess that I wrote—a great deal—and my first professional triumph, in any case, the first effort of mine to be seen in print, occurred at the age of twelve or thereabouts, when a short story I had written about the Spanish revolution won some sort of a prize in an extremely short-lived church newspaper. I remember the story was censored by the lady editor, though I don’t remember why, and I was outraged.

Also wrote plays, and songs, for one of which I received a letter of congratulations from Mayor La Guardia,\(^2\) and poetry, about which the less said, the better. My mother was delighted by all these goings-on, but my father wasn’t; he wanted me to be a preacher. When I was fourteen I became a preacher, and when I was seventeen I stopped. Very shortly thereafter I left home. For God knows how long I struggled with the world of commerce and industry—I guess they would say they struggled with me—and when I was about twenty-one I had enough done of a novel to get a Saxton Fellowship. When I was twenty-two the fellowship was over, the novel turned out to be unsalable, and I started waiting on tables in a Village\(^3\) restaurant and writing book reviews—mostly, as it turned out, about the Negro problem, concerning which the color of my skin made me automatically an expert. Did another book, in company with photographer Theodore Pelatowski, about the store-front churches in Harlem. This book met exactly the same fate as my first—fellowship, but no sale. (It was a Rosenwald Fellowship.) By the time I was twenty-four I had decided to stop reviewing books about the Negro problem—which, by this time, was only slightly less horrible in print than it was in life—and I packed my bags and went to France, where I finished, God knows how, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Any writer, I suppose, feels that the world into which he was born is nothing less than a conspiracy against the cultivation of his talent—which attitude certainly has a great deal to support it. On the other hand, it is only because the world looks on his talent with such a frightening indifference that the artist is compelled to make his talent important. So that any writer, looking back over even so short a span of time as I am here forced to assess, finds that the things which hurt him and the things which helped him cannot be divorced from each other; he could be helped in a certain way only because he was hurt in a certain way; and his help is simply to be enabled to move from one conundrum to the next—one is tempted to say that he moves from one disaster to the next. When one begins looking for influences one finds them by the

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1. **exasperating** adj.: irritating; very annoying.
2. **Mayor La Guardia:** Fiorello La Guardia, mayor of New York City from 1934 to 1945.
3. **Village:** Greenwich Village, a section of Manhattan noted as a center for writers and other artists.

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**Vocabulary**

- **bleak** adj.: cheerless.
- **censored** (sen’sard) v.: cut or changed to remove material deemed objectionable.
- **assess** (a-ses’) v.: evaluate; judge the value of.
- **conundrum** (ka-nun’dram) n.: riddle.
score. I haven't thought much about my own, not enough anyway; I hazard that the King James Bible, the rhetoric of the store-front church, something ironic and violent and perpetually understated in Negro speech—and something of Dickens' love for bravura—have something to do with me today; but I wouldn't stake my life on it. Likewise, innumerable people have helped me in many ways; but finally, I suppose, the most difficult (and most rewarding) thing in my life has been the fact that I was born a Negro and was forced, therefore, to effect some kind of truce with this reality. (Truce, by the way, is the best one can hope for.)

One of the difficulties about being a Negro writer (and this is not special pleading, since I don't mean to suggest that he has it worse than anybody else) is that the Negro problem is written about so widely. The bookshelves groan under the weight of information, and everyone therefore considers himself informed. And this information, furthermore, operates usually (generally, popularly) to reinforce traditional attitudes. Of traditional attitudes there are only two—For or Against—and I, personally, find it difficult to say which attitude has caused me the most pain. I am speaking as a writer; from a social point of view I am perfectly aware that the change from ill-will to good-will, however motivated, however imperfect, however expressed, is better than no change at all.

But it is part of the business of the writer—as I see it—to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source. From this point of view the Negro problem is nearly inaccessible. It is not only written about so widely; it is written about so badly. It is quite possible to say that the price a Negro pays for becoming articulate is to find himself, at length, with nothing to be articulate about. ("You taught me language," says Caliban to Prospero, and my profit on't is I know how to curse.) Consider: the tremendous social activity that this problem generates imposes on whites and Negroes alike the necessity of looking forward, of working to bring about a better day. This is fine; it keeps the waters troubled; it is all, indeed, that has made possible the Negro's progress. Nevertheless, social affairs are not generally speaking the writer's prime concern, whether they ought to be or not; it is absolutely necessary that he establish between himself and these affairs a distance which will allow, at least, for clarity, so that before he can look forward in any meaningful sense, he must first be allowed to take a long look back. In the context of the Negro problem neither whites nor blacks, for excellent reasons of their own, have the faintest desire to look back; but I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.

I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa. And this meant that in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral at Chartres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history; I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use—I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe. I would have to appropriate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine—I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme—otherwise I would have no place in any scheme. What was the most difficult was the fact that I was forced to admit

Vocabulary

coherent (kō·hīr·ənt) adj.: clear, logical, and consistent.
crucial (krōs′shəl) adj.: critical; decisive.
interloper (inter·lōp′ər) n.: intruder; meddler.
appropriate (ə-prō′prē·ət) v.: take over.

4. bravura (bra·vyōor′ə) n.: florid, brilliant style.
5. Caliban to Prospero: In The Tempest by William Shakespeare, Caliban, a rough creature, is Prospero's slave, whom Prospero tries to civilize. The quotation is from Act I, Scene 2.
something I had always hidden from myself, which the American Negro has had to hide from himself as the price of his public progress; that I hated and feared white people. This did not mean that I loved black people; on the contrary, I despised them, possibly because they failed to produce Rembrandt. In effect, I hated and feared the world. And this meant, not only that I thus gave the world an altogether murderous power over me, but also that in such a self-destroying limbo I could never hope to write.

One writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. The difficulty then, for me, of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation.

I don’t think the dilemma outlined above is uncommon. I do think, since writers work in the disastrously explicit medium of language, that it goes a little way toward explaining why, out of the enormous resources of Negro speech and life, and despite the example of Negro music, prose written by Negroes has been generally speaking so pallid and so harsh. I have not written about being a Negro at such length because I expect that to be my only subject, but only because it was the gate I had to unlock before I could hope to write about anything else. I don’t think that the Negro problem in America can be even discussed coherently without bearing in mind its context; its context being the history, traditions, customs, the moral assumptions and preoccupations of the country; in short, the general social fabric. Appearances to the contrary, no one in America escapes its effects and everyone in America bears some responsibility for it. I believe this the more firmly because it is the overwhelming tendency to speak of this problem as though it were a thing apart. But in the work of Faulkner, in the general attitude and certain specific passages in Robert Penn Warren, and, most significantly, in the advent of Ralph Ellison, one sees the beginnings—at least—of a more genuinely penetrating search. Mr. Ellison, by the way, is the first Negro novelist I have ever read to utilize in language, and brilliantly, some of the ambiguity and irony of Negro life.

About my interests: I don’t know if I have any, unless the morbid desire to own a sixteen-millimeter camera and make experimental movies can be so classified. Otherwise, I love to eat and drink—it’s my melancholy conviction that I’ve scarcely ever had enough to eat (this is because it’s impossible to eat enough if you’re worried about the next meal)—and I love to argue with people who do not disagree with me too profoundly, and I love to laugh. I do not like bohemia, or bohemians, I do not like people whose principal aim is pleasure, and I do not like people who are earnest about anything. I don’t like people who like me because I’m a Negro; neither do I like people who find in the same accident grounds for contempt. I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually. I think all theories are suspect, that the finest principles may have to be modified, or may even be pulverized by the demands of life, and that one must find, therefore, one’s own moral center and move through the world hoping that this center will guide one aright. I consider that I have many responsibilities, but none greater than this: to last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done.

I want to be an honest man and a good writer.

6. limbo n.: borderland state of uncertainty and oblivion.
7. pallid adj.: dull; lacking in vitality.

Vocabulary
explicit (eks·plisˈit) adj.: clear; definite.
pulverized (pulˈver·əd) v.: crushed; destroyed.

8. bohemia n.: any nonconformist, unconventional community, often made up of writers and other artists.
Toni Morrison (1931— ) was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. She is noted for her novels Song of Solomon (1977) and Beloved (1987). She delivered this eulogy at Baldwin’s memorial service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City on December 8, 1987.

from On James Baldwin

Toni Morrison

Jimmy, there is too much to think about you, and too much to feel. The difficulty is your life refuses summation—it always did—and invites contemplation instead. Like many of us left here I thought I knew you. Now I discover that in your company it is myself I know. That is the astonishing gift of your art and your friendship: You gave us ourselves to think about, to cherish. We are like Hall Montana¹ watching “with new wonder” his brother saints, knowing the song he sang is us, “He is us.”

I never heard a single command from you, yet the demands you made on me, the challenges you issued to me, were nevertheless unmistakable, even if unenforced: that I work and think at the top of my form, that I stand on moral ground but know that ground must be shored up by mercy, that “the world is before [me] and [I] need not take it or leave it as it was when [I] came in.”

Well, the season was always Christmas with you there and, like one aspect of that scenario, you did not neglect to bring at least three gifts. You gave me a language to dwell in, a gift so perfect it seems my own invention. I have been thinking your spoken and written thoughts for so long I believed they were mine. I have been seeing the world through your eyes for so long, I believed that clear clear view was my own. Even now, even here, I need you to tell me what I am feeling and how to articulate it. So I have pored again through the 6,895 pages of your published work to acknowledge the debt and thank you for the credit. No one possessed or inhabited language for me the way you did. You made American English honest—genuinely international. . . .

The second gift was your courage, which you let us share: the courage of one who could go as a stranger in the village and transform the distances between people into intimacy with the whole world; courage to understand that experience in ways that made it a personal revelation for each of us. It was you who gave us the courage to appropriate an alien, hostile, all-white geography because you had discovered that “this world [meaning history] is white no longer and it will never be white again.” Yours was the courage to live life in and from its belly as well as beyond its edges, to see and say what it was, to recognize and identify evil but never fear or stand in awe of it. It is a courage that came from a ruthless intelligence married to a pity so profound it could convince anyone who cared to know that those who despised us “need the moral

¹ Hall Montana: character in Baldwin’s novel Just Above My Head.
authority of their former slaves, who are the only people in the world who know anything about them and who may be indeed, the only people in the world who really care anything about them." . . .

The third gift was hard to fathom and even harder to accept. It was your tenderness—a tenderness so delicate I thought it could not last, but last it did and envelop me it did. In the midst of anger it tapped me lightly like the child in Tish’s womb. . . .

2. **Tish**: character in Baldwin’s novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

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**Response and Analysis**

**Reading Check**

1. What was Baldwin’s childhood like?

2. What does Baldwin see as the business of a writer?

3. According to the essay, what was the most crucial time in Baldwin’s development? What did he learn about himself then?

4. What does Baldwin say is his greatest responsibility?

**Thinking Critically**

5. According to Baldwin, how does a writer make use of his or her experience? Do you think Baldwin practices what he preaches in this essay? Support your response with details from the text.

6. Why does Baldwin say his “social situation” as an African American creates a dilemma for him as a writer?

7. What **tone** does Baldwin take toward his subject matter? What specific words or details help you to identify his tone?

8. Do you agree with Baldwin’s statement that “the world looks on [the artist’s] talent with such a frightening indifference”? Back up your opinion with examples of contemporary writers, painters, musicians, or other artists.

9. What do you think were Baldwin’s main goals in writing these autobiographical notes? Do you think he achieved his goals? Explain.

10. By the end of the essay, has Baldwin convinced you to accept his view of the role of the writer in society, especially the African American writer? (Go back over your reading notes.) Use details from the text to defend your stance.

11. Toni Morrison is an African American writer who says she received three gifts from Baldwin. (See the **Connection** on page 1116.) What are those gifts? How would you interpret Baldwin’s statement about the crown, quoted at the end of Morrison’s eulogy?

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**Skills Focus**

**Literary Skills**

- **Analyze tone.**

**Reading Skills**

- **Evaluate an author’s arguments.**

**Writing Skills**

- **Write an essay containing an assertion.**

**Vocabulary Skills**

- **Demonstrate word knowledge.**

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James Baldwin

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WRITING

Presenting Your Own Argument

An assertion is a statement of opinion about some issue. An assertion is not a factual statement; it cannot be proved true. To persuade your audience to accept your assertions, you must back them up with facts, examples, or anecdotes.

Write a brief essay in which you make an assertion about one of the opinions Baldwin expresses in this essay. Open with the statement from Baldwin’s essay that you want to focus on. Then, state your assertion. Support your assertion with facts, with examples, or with a personal story. Here are some of Baldwin’s assertions that you might want to respond to. Remember, Baldwin wrote this essay a long time ago, in 1955.

- “I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly. . . .” (page 1114)
- “Everyone in America bears some responsibility for it [the Negro problem]. . . .” (page 1115)
- “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” (page 1115)

Vocabulary Development

Back to the Text

How would you answer these questions about Baldwin’s “Autobiographical Notes”? The underlined words are Vocabulary words and are defined in the essay.

1. What were some of the bleak aspects of Baldwin’s childhood?
2. How did Baldwin feel about writing being censored?
3. How did Baldwin assess the relationship of African Americans to Western culture?
4. According to Baldwin, what conundrum does the African American writer face?
5. Where would Baldwin look for a coherent view of life?
6. What moral quality does Baldwin view as crucial when evaluating himself as a man?
7. Why did Baldwin feel he was an interloper in Western civilization?
8. Why does Baldwin feel it is necessary for him to appropriate Western culture?
9. What explicit attitude toward America does Baldwin express?
10. What social and political situations might have pulverized James Baldwin?

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