

Name _____ Date _____

James Baldwin

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b’

James Baldwin was born on August 2, 1924, to a young single mother in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. When he was about three years old, his mother married a Baptist minister. As a teenager, Baldwin followed in his stepfather’s footsteps and became a junior minister at a local church. However, he lost interest in the church for two reasons: he felt that many people had used Christian tenets to justify enslaving and oppressing Black people, and he was attracted to men and did not feel the church would welcome him.

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Baldwin was an excellent student and had a passion for reading and writing. Inspired by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, he regularly patronized the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, which had recently been established as the Division of Negro Literature. He published many stories, plays, and poems in his high school magazine. After graduation, he put aside his plans for college because he had to work to support his seven younger siblings. He took any job he could find, including laying railroad tracks in New Jersey.

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Notes

2. b'

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As a young Black man in an era of legal segregation, Baldwin experienced many instances of racism and discrimination. He described one episode in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1943 that particularly unsettled him. He entered a restaurant, where a waitress told him he couldn't be served because he was Black. This refusal of service ignited his already-building rage, and he threw a glass of water at the waitress. The glass hit a mirror and shattered. Baldwin managed to escape before the police came. Writing about the incident in the essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*, he said, "I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred that I carried in my own heart."

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3. b'

Notes

Later in 1943, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village, a neighborhood in New York City that was popular with artists and writers. He worked odd jobs to support himself while writing a novel. In 1948, he moved to Paris. He hoped that leaving the US would help prevent him from being pigeonholed as a Black writer. He also wanted to come to terms with his sexual fluidity, which he felt did not fit into any one category. He ended up living in France for most of his life.

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Baldwin flourished creatively in Paris. His semi-autobiographical first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, was published in 1953, followed by *Giovanni's Room* in 1955, *Another Country* in 1962, and more. In his novels, Baldwin explored themes that were controversial at the time, including gay and interracial relationships. Rather than the one-dimensional caricatures that these identities were often given in fiction, his characters had nuances and complexities that more accurately represented their humanity.

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4. b'

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In addition to his novels, Baldwin gained notoriety for his collections of essays, including *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963). His writing was largely about Black identity and the struggle of Black Americans in a racist system. His keen observations made him a leading voice of the civil rights movement. Much of Baldwin's writing was aimed at white people. He called for them to open their eyes to the uncomfortable reality of how Black people were treated in the past and present and examine their own role in upholding that system. He demanded that white Americans recognize Black people's humanity.

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5. b'

Notes

Baldwin always called himself an "American writer" as opposed to a "Black writer." Members of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s criticized him because he often wrote to and for white people instead of focusing solely on Black audiences. Baldwin argued that addressing white people was the most realistic way to bring about societal change. By staying away from both mainstream Black and white literary trends of the time, Baldwin's work was iconoclastic and wholly individual.

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James Baldwin died on December 1, 1987, in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France. In his lifetime, he witnessed both the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement, the artistic and political victories of Black Americans. His legacy lives on in his essays, novels, plays, and poems.

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