# The Fire Next Time

**James Baldwin**

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# Plot Summary

This book consists of two essays, both examining the so called "Negro Problem" in America in the early 1960's ("Negro" was the term then in use for African-American, and is used interchangeably with the term "black" in this book. The use of both terms in this analysis is therefore reflective of their usage in the book, and of the socio-cultural-literary context in which they were written). Themes other than "the Negro Problem" explored by the book include an examination of the shallowness and ineffectiveness of religious faith, and of inter-generational influences and relationships.

The two essays in this book make up what is essentially a three-point dissection of the so-called "Negro Problem" (a euphemism for racial tension) in the America of the early 1960's. The first of these three points is a personal perspective on the experience of being a Negro in America at that time, and is developed in both essays - throughout the entirety of the first, and in the extended middle section of the second. In both these pieces of writing, the author speaks eloquently, at times with anger and at other times with an almost desperate compassion, of how it feels to live the life of a Negro (with all the racist connotations of that word intact).

In this context, the first essay can be seen as a plea to his young nephew and, by extension, other young Negro men to transcend already simmering anger and adopt a broader, perhaps even compassionate perspective. This plea can also be seen, albeit not so plainly, in the writing in the middle section of the second essay, which is a narration of the author's experience of dining with Elijah Muhammad, a popular and charismatic Negro leader. The other young men in attendance at the dinner are, in many ways, portrayed similarly to the author's nephew; and the writing in this section is a similarly phrased and felt plea for broader perspective, deeper thought, and greater understanding.

The second point of dissection in the book is its detailed, at times almost vitriolic, examination of Christianity and its role in both American society and in the oppression of the Negro race. This examination takes place in the first part of the second essay, in which the author describes, with occasional poeticism, the joy with which he first became involved in the Christian church. He also describes his subsequent growing disillusionment with the church and its teachings. He describes at length how that disillusionment simultaneously deepened and broadened as he became older, detailing what he sees as the church's hypocrisies, developing theories about how those hypocrisies affected and continue to affect American life. He suggests that the only way America can become what it has the potential to become is to abandon Christian teaching.

The third point of examination of "the Negro Problem" is related to the second, and is portrayed throughout the book as the narrow, self-deluding limitations of the Christian, American perspective, not only on Negro Americans, but also on life itself. It's important to note that, throughout the book, these limitations are discussed not only in terms of white Americans, but also in terms of Negroes. The author suggests that in the same way as whites have been blinded to both their collective and individual truths, so have the Negroes. They have bought into what they have been taught to believe and told they MUST believe, and as such are fearful of challenging anything that might disrupt the safe, albeit toxic, status quo.

Throughout the book, the author suggests that the way past "the Negro Problem" in general, and these three manifestations of it in particular, is for both Negro and white America to transcend what they think they know, believe, understand and fear. He suggests that America, as both a country and an ideal, is handicapped by narrowness of thinking. Only by expanding perception and experience, on both sides, can America and the people living there become fulfilled and honored in the way it can, and perhaps should, be.

# Section 1

Section 1 Summary and Analysis

This book consists of two essays, both examining the so called "Negro Problem" in America in the early 1960's ("Negro" was the term then in use for African-American, and is used interchangeably with the term "black" in this book. The use of both terms in this analysis is therefore reflective of their usage in the book, and of the socio-cultural-literary context in which they were written). Themes other than "the Negro Problem" explored include an examination of the shallowness and ineffectiveness of religious faith, and of inter-generational influences and relationships.

"My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation". This first part of the book is, in fact, what the subtitle suggests it is: a letter written by the author to his nephew. The letter begins with descriptions of how the loving and passionate the author feels about his nephew, writing with particular poeticism of how he sees resemblances in him to both his (the nephew's) father and grandfather, the author's brother and father respectively (see "Quotes", p. 18 - 1, p. 19). In describing these resemblances, he refers to how that white America contributed to the emotional and spiritual destruction of both men, warning his nephew that what destroyed them can also destroy him (see "Quotes", p. 18 - 2). He explains that he's writing the letter to warn his nephew about the world he must learn to deal with, saying that most of the people in that world have no idea that he exists. He comments on the way his (the author's) brother has become bitter, but adds that there are those among the immediate family and their people who are not (see "Quotes", p. 20).

The author states clearly and with evident anger that his nephew will face powerful restrictions on the development of his sense of self, solely as the result of his race. He describes the fear with which he believes white people react when confronted with black people determined to change the way in which they're perceived and treated (see

"Quotes", p. 23). He then encourages his nephew to face the challenges he will meet with compassion and with love, adding that, if he does, white America will become transformed (see "Quotes", p. 24). The author concludes his letter with a quote from an unnamed, apparently black poet. "The very time I thought I was lost, my Dungeon shook and my chains fell off", and a reference to how the country is celebrating The Emancipation a hundred years too early. He suggests that "we cannot be free until they are free", wishes his nephew Godspeed and signs off.

There are two key elements to note about this letter. The first is its barely suppressed tone of anger and resentment toward white American society, evident even in its most poetically and lyrically written sections. It's interesting to note the juxtaposition of this anger with the author's suggestion later in the letter that his nephew meet the challenges facing him with compassion and love. The question then becomes whether such compassion is even possible, when there is also such evident anger. The author makes the point again later in the book that compassion is the best, almost the only, way of facing down racial oppression.

There are two other vivid examples of his developing this theme. The first can be found late in Section 2 Part 2, when he contrasts the (hunger? desire? justification?) for violence of Elijah Muhammad and his followers with his own ideal of what might be called the compassionate revolution. The other example, perhaps the most vivid of all, comes at the end of the book - Section 2, Part 3, when he seems to be actually pleading for this course of action to be taken. His evident passion notwithstanding, the fact remains that there continues to be a subtext of anger throughout the book.This raises another question - does the author truly believe what he's saying about compassion? Is he merely giving lip service to it, or does he believe in it, but is as yet unable to fully live it?

All that being said, the presence of the author's anger ebbs and flows throughout the book. It's never expressed as intensely as it is in this section, but forms something of an emotional undertone throughout both his arguments and the more straightforward narration of his experiences. It's at times tinged with sadness, with regret, and

occasionally even reluctance. There is the sense, at times, that the author wishes he didn't feel anger, that he could take as much pride in America (both the country and the concept) as he feels it deserves. There is the simultaneous sense, however, that his anger is justified - that it is, in some ways, the only possible response for his people, given the way they've been treated over the centuries.

The second, and perhaps most important element to note here is the sense that the author is addressing his words and thoughts, not only to his nephew, but to all young black men in similar situations - angry, rebellious, challenged, eager to confront and trigger change. This sense is triggered first by the repeated references to the author's brother, which undoubtedly refer to his biological brother but that seem, after a while, to also refer to his racial brother, or brothers - that is, other black men. This sense is developed and refined by the reference to the nephew's grandmother (the author's mother) - in particular, the line "she has been working for them all their lives". There is the very strong impression here that this woman is being written about as a kind of archetype, a universal image of black women working (as a maid, a housekeeper or a nanny) for a white employer.

With this idea in mind, that the letter is not only addressed to the author's nephew, but to the entire black community. It becomes possible to see that in its final exhortations to hope and to change, the author is speaking of the possibility of hope and freedom for all black people, not just his nephew. The idea is reinforced further by another quote from the second-last paragraph - "you who come from sturdy, peasant stock, men who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity." He's not just speaking of his nephew. He is speaking of every young black man descended from the other young black men, imported into America as slave labor, for generations. He's therefore not only urging his nephew to consider and/or develop compassion and love, he's urging the entire Negro community to do so.

"The Emancipation" is a shorthand description of a key moment in American history. It refers to the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation by Abraham Lincoln in

1873, a document that freed the slaves. By including a reference to the Emancipation here, and in this particular context, the author is suggesting that the proclamation was, in effect, on paper only. Black Americans may not be enslaved as history defines it, but are still in slavery to white perceptions, fears, resentments, and power-oriented belief systems.

This suggestion is developed further, albeit less overtly, in Section 2 Part 2, the author's narration of his encounter with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. His perspective in this section seems to be that, in their furious determination to win control of America from white people, preferably by force, Elijah Muhammad and his followers are essentially reacting to resentment with resentment, rather than with compassion, patience and transcendence. With this in mind, it's interesting to consider the author's determined attack on Christianity that begins in the following section. Tolerance and compassion are, after all, among the most vividly defined hallmarks of Christianity. Is it possible that the author hasn't purged Christianity from his system as thoroughly as he might have liked?

# Section 2, Part 1

Section 2, Part 1 Summary and Analysis

"Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind", Part 1. This section of the book opens with two quotations. The first is from Rudyard Kipling, a British author who lived in, and wrote extensively about, colonial India. The quotation is in the form of a poem, and urges the listener (the indigenous Indian population) to "take up the White Man's burden" and not call too loudly for freedom to ease their pain. The second quotation is from a hymn referring to the cry of a sinner for redemption "down at the cross" (where Jesus Christ died), how redemption came to the singer, and cleansed his heart.

The first part of "Down at the Cross" is an examination of Christianity, from both the personal perspective of the author and from a black cultural perspective. The author discusses at length the origins of his teenage experiences with the Christian church. He refers to how he used faith and participation in church services as a kind of spiritual salve for his torturous sexual and sensual awakenings, and of how he was desperate to avoid the criminal life of Harlem in general and of the Avenue in particular (see "Quotes", p. 34). He also refers to his desperation to become a better, less fearful man than his father (see "Quotes", p. 41). He comments on the spiritual and moral poverty in which he grew up on the streets of Harlem. He traces its sources, both personal and cultural, to being black (see "Quotes", p. 39).

He describes his first visit to a church, where he encountered a woman Pastor who greeted him with, ironically enough, the same question as the pimps and whores and drug dealers on the street - "Whose boy are you?" He describes his immediate feeling of release and relief, as well as his response - "Yours". He then tells of his churchgoing experiences which culminated in his being "saved". He says this was, in the minds of the church and its congregation, a release from sin; but in fact was for him a release of his socio-culturally mandated guilt over being black.

He then describes in detail how that experience led him to become a popular teenage preacher, and how this brief career was, in fact, a means of hiding from himself. "I rushed home from school," he says, "to the church, to the altar, to be alone there, to commune with Jesus, my dearest Friend, who would never fail me, who knew all the secrets of my heart. Perhaps He did, but I didn't, and the bargain we struck, actually, down there at the foot of the cross, was that He would never let me find out." He comments that eventually he did find out, not only the truth about himself, but about the church - how preachers became rich while their congregations stayed poor, how so-called Christian tolerance and compassion extended only to those within the community, and how the Negro Christian experience was, in fact, based on writings and teachings of old, white, educated men.

In spite of still feeling a passionate, enlivening connection to the spirit of the church (see "Quotes", p. 47), the author discourses at length on the failings of Christianity in general, not just the Christianity of Harlem (see "Quotes", p. 45, 59 and 61). This is described, in essence, as its failure to recognize and succor every individual in his/her full experience of full humanity. Finally, he comments on the loss of a full experience of humanity resulting from an embracing of the ways of Christianity (see "Quotes", p. 57).

The quotations at the beginning of this section create, through both their content and the way they're juxtaposed with each other, a spare but undeniably vivid portrayal of one race's domination over the other. The first quotation, the Kipling, delineates the white perspective. Kipling, a white Englishman in India at a time when India was governed by a self-righteous, self-serving minority of whites, is essentially telling his Indian servants to do as they're told and to stifle their protests and concerns. They are, he seems to be suggesting, completely unaware of how good their life actually is. There is also the possibility that in his reference to "the white man's burden", he is not speaking as literally as he might seem to be at first glance. In other words, he may not be referring specifically to carrying actual burdens (boxes, cases, tea trays - servitude). It's possible that he's also referring to the white man's burden of suffering in silence, Kipling being British, and of the old "stiff upper lip" school. Either way, he's urging

the native population to be what the British want them to be, and to not express itself or its feelings at all.

The second quotation is an expression of what the author maintains throughout the book is the subjugation of the Negro spirit to white spirituality - essentially, the teachings of the Christian church. The hymn is apparently a spiritual song of both suffering and hope defined by the exclusively, uniquely Negro experience but expressed - and here is the point - in Christian terms. In other words, the author is making the same point in the quotation from the hymn as he's making in the quote from Kipling - that Negroes experience their faith, their suffering and their hope in terms other than their own.

It could be argued that this form of expression is appropriate. Negro slaves experienced suffering as the result of the pain inflicted upon them by whites, why shouldn't they express their hope in similar, white defined terms? However the author suggests throughout the book that, in order to experience true freedom, Negroes must move beyond a culture of reaction, and to a culture of creation. Anger, he's suggesting, is reaction. Violence is reaction. But compassion, love, faith, and genuine hope spring from the intuitive, active human spirit. This spirit, he seems to be suggesting, has either been silenced (by whites) or is ignored (by Negroes) in the name of living, acting and reacting in safe, traditional, fear-based ways.

All that said, this first section of the essay is largely taken up with the author's examination, almost a condemnation, of the Christian church. There are two key elements to this examination. The first is that he writes from almost an exclusively personal perspective. He makes no attempt to suggest that his experiences with the church were, or are, similar to those of anyone else. The one likening between different experiences that he does make comes in his implication that he and the young men and women on the Avenue were doing essentially the same thing. They were making a desperate, self-blinding effort to escape from the economic, spiritual, social, political and emotional oppression of being black in white America. There is the sense that, for the author, Jesus was his addiction. Just as the young people in the street

avoided the pain of their situation through the use alcohol and/or other drugs, so did the author through the church. The unanswered question posed by this portrayal of the church is whether the author perceives others who have embraced Christianity so fervently as suffering from the same willful self-blindness. There are moments throughout the book where the author seems to be suggesting that this is in fact the case; but he never explicitly makes the point.

The second key element of the author's exploration/condemnation of Christianity in this section is the author's description of how he broke free of his addiction, how he discovered and came to love a truth other than what he has come to understand as his reality. It's important to note that there are two components to this truth. One is the hypocrisy of other church leaders. Yet it is also his own spirit of determination to not be what those around them, particularly his father, believe him to be. Both components are developed and defined in considerable detail here. His discussions foreshadow the revelation of similar concerns with what the author contends is a similar sort of faith - the Nation of Islam, portrayed in this section as a positive alternative to Christianity but which becomes, in his experience narrated in the following section, just as hollow a faith. Specific parallelisms between the two faiths include the references here to Christianity's limited perspectives, the faithful's reliance on and devotion to charismatic leaders and, above all, Christianity's material hypocrisy (preachers preaching austerity while living in luxury). They all foreshadow references in Part 3 to the effects on both individuals and society of these aspects of Christianity.

Meanwhile, as he explores these two manifestations of his new, post-Christian truth the author, probably deliberately, allows his anger to resurface. It's interesting to note, however, that in terms of his relationship with Christianity, the author's anger here is, as previously discussed, tinged more with sadness and a sense of loss than it is at other times. There is almost the sense that he continues to carry with him, in spite of all his other experiences, a lingering sense of church-inspired safety, hope and joy. This sense is embodied in the quotation from p. 47, in which he says (essentially) that nothing can arouse in him the joy and passion that various manifestations of church life (music, singing, enthusiasm) still can.

It's possible in this context to see again how his theory that the "Negro Problem" can be transcended by compassion and love is, in fact, more based in Christianity than he might be prepared to admit. Meanwhile, in terms of his relationship with his father, there is the very strong sense here that the author's anger is undiluted. There is a very clear sense of blame here, that the author is pointing an accusatory finger at his father for not, in essence, being strong, independent and courageous individual.

It's interesting to consider, in this context, whether the previously discussed principle of extension practiced in the author's letter to his nephew carries over into his (the author's) feelings for his father. Their relationship is seen only briefly in this section; but the glimpse is quite vivid and is the key, non-church component of Part 1 of the essay, and indeed of the book's essential thematic premise. There is the sense here, throughout the essay and throughout the book, that the author carries a great deal of resentment toward his father. This resentment, as previously discussed, carries over to Elijah Muhammad, who seems to the author to be as domineering and as limited in perspective.

The source of this resentment, the author indicates, is that his father had an intense, fear-driven resistance to what might be described as breaking prescribed patterns of behavior. A black man's behavior, a son's behavior, a citizen of Harlem's behavior - it seems that, at least in the author's experience, his father had strict codes of what should be done and said, and how, and why, in every facet of existence, codes that in the author's mind and heart were limitations. It's interesting to consider this aspect of the author's experience and his writing in juxtaposition with the first essay, in which "brother", "grandmother" and even "nephew" seemed, by extension, to refer to all black men of one generation, all black women, and younger black men of the next generation. Is it possible to see the author's attitude toward his father (who, it must be remembered, is discussed in Section 1 in terms not particularly favorable) as, in fact, his attitude towards all black men of the previous generation? Is he, in a sense, condemning all those of the previous generation for living in fear? This idea can be seen as developed further in the following section, in which Elijah Muhammad, a man of essentially the same generation as the author's father, is portrayed as if not exactly

living in fear, is at the very least living with the same kind of limited perspectives.

# Section 2, Part 2

Section 2, Part 2 Summary and Analysis

This part of "Down at the Cross" explores similarities and differences between Christianity and The Nation of Islam, the name for the followers of Elijah Muhammad, a prophet who claimed to have a revelation of truth directly from Allah. The author summarizes that truth as: black people are Allah's creations, white people are the creations of the devil and are therefore devils themselves, and that the time will inevitably come when black Americans will be able to claim their destiny and eliminate white people from the earth. The author describes his experience of seeing members of the Nation of Islam preaching on the street, making particular note of how they were watched by police (see "Quotes", p. 62). He compares the Nation of Islam preachers, and Elijah Muhammad in particular, with the preachers he listened to when he was a child, and considers the differences between the Christian belief system and that of the version of Islam practiced by Elijah Muhammad and his followers (see "Quotes", p. 65).

At this point, there is an extended consideration of the parallels and differences between the experiences of black Americans in America and Jews during the Holocaust of World War II. The author makes pointed comments about the Holocaust being evidence of the potential for cruelty in white people. This discussion concludes with the suggestion that all over the world, Christianity has lost any capacity for moral authority it may have once had (see "Quotes", p. 71).

The central portion of this part of the essay is taken up with an extensive narrative of the author's experience at a dinner hosted by Elijah Muhammad at his Chicago home. The author describes the home as being large and displaying evident wealth. He describes the men and women as sitting, conversing (for the most part) and eating separately, and he describes Elijah Muhammad as having great charm and charisma, yet with great pain in his eyes (see "Quotes", p. 76).

The author describes his growing irritation as Elijah Muhammad (who reminds the author increasingly of his tyrannical father) turns the conversation to his apparently favorite theme - the evils perpetrated by the white man (see "Quotes", p. 82). The author describes how he becomes particularly disturbed by how the other (male) guests seem to do nothing but echo Elijah Muhammad's words and thoughts. He also describes their reactions when questioned about how the Nation of Islam's goals are to be met, saying their responses refer to ideals and dreams rather than facts or plans of action. Finally, he describes his dilemma when he hears all white people condemned, a dilemma caused by the fact that he knows, trusts and loves several white people - realizing, however, that these people are the exceptions, and to speak of them to Elijah Muhammad and the others would have no effect on their attitudes.

When Elijah Muhammad hears of the author's Christian background and asks what he is now, the author tells him he's a writer, and doesn't think much about religion any more. At the conclusion of the dinner, Elijah Muhammad tells the author that he will be driven home in order to protect him from the dangers of "the white devils" as long as possible. A car, described by the author in terms that suggest that it's large and expensive looking, arrives to take the author to his destination - a meeting with some of his white friends. He and Elijah Muhammad make their farewells, and then as he's being driven, the author talks with the driver (a young black man) about the Nation of Islam's goals, returning to the question of how they will become a reality. They reach no solutions (see "Quotes", p. 95); but just as they're arriving at the destination the driver comments that nothing will ever again be the way it was.

This second part of "Down at the Cross" is defined by a sense of reluctant ambivalence in the writing. It seems as though the author wants to believe in the values and sense of community at the heart of the Nation of Islam, and on some level seems to agree with, and take a degree of pleasure in, both. At the same time, however, he is evidently quite aware of the similarities between the Nation of Islam and Christianity. Both belief systems are experienced and portrayed as having limited, shallowly considered perspectives, as having charismatic leaders, and as having faithful who follow those leaders with near-unquestioning near-adoration.

Perhaps the most vividly defined parallel between the systems is the way in which a certain kind of spiritual and emotional austerity is preached while at the same time a certain material and economic ostentation is practiced. Here, as in Part 1, the leaders of the religious community (Elijah Muhammad here, Christian preachers in Part 1) are portrayed as having big expensive cars and expansive homes. In other words, the parallel is hypocrisy. Associated with this hypocrisy is what might be defined as a much subtler, but perhaps even more frightening, parallel. It's never stated directly or defined by the author, but there seems to be similarities in the way both Christian preachers and Elijah Muhammad exploit the blackness of their followers, as well as the misery associated with being black, for their own gains - of power, of prestige, and of money. It seems, therefore, that black misery is being doubled - being exploited by whites as well as by their own people - and perhaps even trebled, given that those following the Nation of Islam seem to be completely unaware that this is happening.

Also in this section, a very telling glimpse of the author's relationship with his father appears in his (the author's) reference to his growing irritation as he listens to Elijah Muhammad. As has previously been discussed, there is the sense here that the author's intriguing narrative technique of referring to individuals but giving the sense that he's speaking to, and of, larger groups, is again coming into play. The technique first manifests in *My Dungeon Shook*, the first essay in the book in which the author seems, when he's referring to his nephew and his mother, to be referring to all angry young black men and all strong, wise, understanding women. The sense of extension here is less apparent. It's not quite as clear that, in referring to the similarities between his father and Elijah Muhammad, and to his negative feelings about them both, the author is referring to all older black men of the previous generation.

It's certainly possible, however, that this is exactly what he's doing. All that being said, there is some question as to whether the author could have ever been completely objective about Muhammad, given his pre-conditioned response to what might be described as older black male authority figures. The reader would, in fact, be quite justified in wondering whether the author perhaps missed something valuable in Elijah Muhammad's teaching and presence simply because he was caught up in expectation

of anger. To take this idea further - if, as seems possible, the author's perceptions were in fact overly colored by preconception, is he not in essence reacting in the same way he suggests that white people react to Negroes, and vice versa? Is he not, on some level, selling both Elijah Muhammad and his father short by making no genuine effort to truly get inside them and understand them? Is this not the same kind of compassion-based effort he strongly asserts that both whites and blacks need to adopt if the "Negro Problem" is ever to be fully solved?

The author's diversion into examining the parallels between Nazism and racism is interesting, and written in a stark, very powerful fashion. It essentially suggests that Nazism was white Christianity at its most violent, least hypocritical, and most distilled. What is the difference, the author suggests, between the Nazi determination to eliminate the Jewish people and the Christian determination to eliminate infidels, unbelievers and pagans? Are Christians, in fact, responsible for a holocaust of their own? Are black Christians perpetuating the spiritual holocaust of their own people? It's important to note that these questions are never asked overtly, but are instead implied by the presence of the comparison. In other words, the section manifests quite subtly throughout the book a certain shallowness of thought and a certain tendency on the part of the author to make strong, blanket statements without considering their implications. His statements here are one example; his previously discussed (possibly tainted) attitude towards Elijah Muhammad is another. Does the author truly think about what he's saying, or, conversely, does he raise the issues and leave them unresolved in order for the reader to think about them, define them, and come to the answers oneself?

# Section 2, Part 3

Section 2, Part 3 Summary and Analysis

After a brief speculative discussion of where the Nation of Islam gets its money, the author turns to an extensive consideration of whether the Nation's goals (eliminating the white race from America, the black race taking power) can realistically be accomplished. He clearly expresses the opinion that logistically those goals are impossible, the main reason being the relatively small number of (financially disadvantaged) blacks compared to the large numbers of (relatively wealthy and much more influential) whites. He indicates that he supports the necessity for the cultural transformation sought by the Nation of Islam. Yet expresses the doubt that such change will ever happen because of the complete reluctance, even inability, for whites to see that such change is even desirable, let alone necessary. This inability, he suggests, comes from a profound socio-cultural unwillingness to face several realities - the reality of being an individual (see "Quotes", p. 102), the reality of being an American (see "Quotes", p. 103), and the reality of being a human being (see "Quotes", p. 105). He goes on to suggest that one way white Americans can come to terms with all those realities is for them to accept, understand, and live in and with Negro experiences and perspectives. "In short," he says, "we, the black and the white, deeply need each other here if we are really to become a nation - if we are really, that is, to achieve our identity, our maturity, as men and women."

Blacks, he suggests, need to be given, or to acquire, white power; while whites need to accept responsibility for the past, the realities of the present, and the possibilities of the future. He speaks of the value and necessity for all Americans, to learn and grow from the experiences of suffering from both the perpetrator's (whites) and victim's (blacks) perspectives, to transcend hatred and mythologies, and to become fully aware of the potential for love and beauty everywhere. He also suggests that for true healing, prosperity, reconciliation and growth, all races, all Americans, must act from a place of love and a desire to preserve beauty, rather than in either ignorance or resentment of

both, or either (see "Quotes", p. 110). "If we do not now dare everything," he says, "the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*"

The author's plea for racial harmony in this section is similar to the plea he makes in Section 1, "My Dungeon Shook", specifically in the way he speaks of universal love and respect for that which is beautiful about being human as the core necessities for such transformation. It's interesting to note that the plea here carries two different components from the first. There is much less anger, and a much broader perspective, of what is needed from both races. The point is not made to suggest that between then and now the author somehow came to that broader perspective, but rather to suggest that a thematically relevant point can be made about the absence of anger. There is the sense here, in both the writing and the ideas being written about, that without strong emotion there is room for a more dispassionate perspective, an opportunity to see what can and should be done uncolored or unaffected by a raw, explosive an emotional desire for something, anything, to happen.

This idea is possibly what lies at the core of the author's discomfort with the Nation of Islam and with Elijah Muhammad. Their actions and beliefs seem, in his experience, to be fueled and defined by both anger and fear, justified as they might very well be. In his rejection of faith, leader and plan, the author seems to be at least attempting to transcend his own anger and fear (in the same way as he is determined to transcend his father's) and come to a perspective that might lead to the healing he so desperately believes to be both necessary and possible.

All that said, there is the sense throughout this section that the author isn't yet able to practice what he preaches (pun intended, since there is a pulpit-like, almost evangelical passion in his writing that resounds with echoes of Christian preaching in general and what the author describes in Section 2, Part 1 as his own teenage preaching in particular). As previously discussed, there is an undeniable presence of anger and resentment throughout the book. It continues here, the section of the book when he is, perhaps paradoxically, the most concerned with his people transcending

their anger as a race. Is he writing from a place of seeking simultaneous self- and racial fulfillment? Is he extending a personal need for healing into a similar racial need? The point is not made to suggest that such an extension is inappropriate. On the contrary, such an extension is, not only not uncommon, but an effective narrative technique.

It must be noted, however, that the author never overtly acknowledges his own anger. It's quite evident in his writing that the book is singularly un-confessional, in that he never admits that the problem he points out in his race is one he shares as an individual. In other words, there are moments at which the author comes dangerously close to self-righteousness. It is the kind of self-righteousness he so resentfully accuses both white Christian preachers and Elijah Muhammad of practicing. It's perhaps appropriate to consider a couple of Biblical teachings - the one about those without sin themselves casting the first condemning stone, and the other one about a man being sure to remove the beam from his own eye before attempting to remove the splinter from the eye of another. This may be putting the point a little strongly; but the point must be made that the author seems, almost undeniably, to be angry. He condemns others who are without apparently being aware of his own. Is this hypocrisy, or is this leadership?

The reference to the Bible at the end of this section has several layers of meaning. In terms of both the book's general perspective on, and the author's personal relationship with, Christianity, the quotation is perhaps a reminder that Christianity's presence and influence is inescapable. In terms of the meaning of the verse itself, it refers to the Biblical story of Noah and the Flood. After God flooded the earth, destroyed all but a very few forms of life as punishment for being ungodly and unloving, he told Noah (who gathered and led the survivors of the catastrophe) that the world would never again face punishment by flood.

He sealed this commitment by placing the rainbow in the sky. It must be noted that there is no reference in the Bible to there never again being punishment of another sort, and this is the source of the song's lyric - which suggests that if humanity doesn't

mend its ways, God will punish the world again, and this time it will be with fire. This, in turn, leads to the third layer of meaning. It seems that the author is suggesting that the particular way that has to be mended is the way whites treat blacks. If this doesn't happen it will be the main trigger, or at the very least a trigger, of the purification by fire to come.

# Important People

## James Baldwin

James Baldwin is the book's author, writing at a time in American social and literary history when the true depth and extent of the so-called "Negro problem" was beginning to become apparent. Biographical information at the end of the book indicates that by the time this book was published he had already written several novels and books of essays, as well as received several awards and fellowships. Biographical information contained in the novel portrays him as having grown up in Harlem, in the midst of that community's economic, spiritual and political poverty - a poverty he seems to have resisted, in various ways, all his life. The various forms of this resistance are portrayed throughout the book.

His active, personal resistance came first in the form of becoming a Christian preacher, a youthful stage of his life chronicled in Section 2, Part 1. The focus of his resistance broadened once he perceived a shallow, uninvolved hypocrisy at the core of both Christian preaching and faith. It is a hypocrisy he not only discovered in other spiritual teachings but also seemed called to seek out, not only in other teachings but also in the experience of being an American, either Negro or white. Meanwhile, the very existence of the book is a manifestation of the ultimate depth and breadth of his resistance. The fact that it was written and published suggests that what was once a personal experience has become an experience he believes is essential for the health of all Americans, black or white. In other words, he writes from a place of transcendent hope that all the manifestations of poverty experienced by all Americans, black and white alike, can be transcended if everyone lived and thought and worked from a place, and towards a goal, of compassion, love, respect and understanding. To that end, his writing is at times angry, at times poetic, but always insistent that Negro/black Americans must respect themselves as individuals and as a community., White Americans must also accept responsibility for the oppressive actions of their individual and communal past. Once these two conditions are met, he suggests,

America can become the fully integrated, fully free country it was intended to be.

## Negro Americans

Negro (black) Americans are portrayed throughout the novel as having been oppressed and victimized by centuries of insensitivity and abuse on the part of white Americans. The book that different sub-communities of Negro Americans have different reactions to this treatment: the Nation of Islam and its dreams of power, the down-and-out citizens of Harlem and their despair, artists like the author and their intellectualized hope. There is a powerfully portrayed sense of anger and pain at the core of the way these sub-groups are defined. But there is a fourth sub-group, also portrayed in this book, in the very brief sketches of the author's mother (see "Quotes", p. 20) and in the pained, passing reference to the hard-working aunt (see "Quotes", p 34). These people are defined as dignified hard working individuals, aware of the anger and pain but somehow rising above it. There are/were, in all likelihood, many more sub-communities in the larger Negro/black community; but their reactions fall outside the scope of this book - nevertheless, the book paints a vivid picture of both oppression and the range of reactions to that oppression.

## White Americans

Very few, if any, white Americans are personally and/or individually portrayed in *The Fire Next Time*; but they are nevertheless a powerful, pervasive presence. They are, in the words and mind of the author and several of the other Negro/black "characters", the chief source of black pain and suffering. It's interesting to note that in Section 2 Part 2 the author makes passing reference to white people he knows, trusts and loves; but these people are never identified beyond this brief description. The author in fact, describes them as "exceptions". White culture as a whole is described as being in denial of its actions, history and attitudes. It must, the author suggests, change its perspective drastically if America is ever to be peacefully rid of "the Negro problem".

# James Baldwin (nephew)

This is the (apparently) young man to whom the first essay, "My Dungeon Shook", is addressed. While his age at the time of the essay's writing is never explicitly defined, there is the sense that he is in his teens. He is likely angry, bitter, hurt, and already prone to violence. The essay/letter, it seems, was written in an effort to help James (the nephew) avoid both the spiritually defeated fate of his grandfather and the violent, potentially criminal fate of his (the nephew's) peers.

# The Author's Brother / The Nephew's Father

The father of James Baldwin (nephew) is referred to only in passing in "My Dungeon Shook". he is described in terms similar to those that describe both his son and his father, moody, angry, bitter, pained, and self-destructive. There is the sense that in writing the letter, the author is trying to keep the stereotypical prophecy "like father like son" from coming true.

# The Author's Mother / The Nephew's Grandmother

Like other members of the author's family, his mother (referred to only as the nephew's grandmother) is referred to only briefly, but also as a kind of archetype of the Negro/black experience. The grandmother is vividly portrayed as living with dignity, restraint and courage. This contrasts the male family members, whose portrayals are sketched in angry, bitter, pained terms.

# The Author's Father

The author's father appears several times throughout the book, always described in terms that portray him as having limited perspectives, as being controlling and judgmental, and as not fully recognizing his son's value or potential. It seems quite

clear that the author carries with him a great deal of resentment toward his father This resentment fuels his feelings for/reactions to other, older, black male authority figures such as Elijah Muhammad.

As is the case with the author's writing about his other family members , there is the sense about his father that he is not only writing about the particular individual, but also about the socio-cultural strata of the black community represented by that individual. In other words, when the author writes to and about his nephew, he seems to be writing to/about all young black men of that generation and that attitude. Similarly, when writing about his (the author's) mother, he seems to be writing about all compassionate, wise, patient, hard-working black women. When writing about his fearful, kowtowing father, he seems to be writing (not to put too fine a point on it) about men he himself describes as "Uncle Toms", subservient, fearful, groveling, small minded and small spirited. The question might then be asked how the author might address others of his own generation, caught as they seem to be (at least in the author's mind) between fear and subservience to that fear on the one hand, and anger and the potential for violence on the other.

## The Woman Preacher

This person appears only briefly, in a passing reference in Section 2 Part 1. She greets the author upon his first visit to a church, welcoming him with the same kind of seductive happiness that pimps, drug leaders and gang leaders greet young people on the street. There is the sense that the author is creating a parallel between the life she offers and the life offered on the street - a life of avoidance, distraction, and desperate spiritual self-medication.

## Elijah Muhammad

Elijah Muhammad was the leader of The Nation of Islam, a radical sect of the Muslim faith founded in the 1960's and which came to socio-political prominence in the

mid-late part of that decade. The beliefs of both Elijah Muhammad and The Nation of Islam were, essentially, that God created the black race while the white race was created by the devil, and that black control of America was both essential and inevitable. He is portrayed by the author, in "Down at the Cross" as being both charismatic and autocratic, reminding the author painfully of his father.

## The Driver

This individual is portrayed as being employed by Elijah Muhammad - a young black man with the angry views of other young black men in The Nation of Islam. He, like the other young men at the dinner hosted by Elijah Muhammad attended by the author, seems to have no concrete idea as to how the socio-cultural revolution proposed by Muhammad will come about - all he has is the faith that it will, and must.

# Objects/Places

## The Titles

There are three titles to consider in this book - the title of the book itself ("The Fire Next Time"), the title of the first essay ("My Dungeon Shook"), and the title of the second essay ("Down at the Cross"). The first and third titles are taken from spirituals, while the second title is taken from a poem by a black poet. All are quoted anonymously. While they all originated with black creators, and while they all have their origins in Christian teachings, they each have something different to say about the book's theme relating to racial tensions between blacks and whites. The book's title is a quotation from a spiritual (for the entire quote see Section 2 Part 3), and suggests that instead of humanity's evil being punished by God with a flood, the next time God inflicts his punishment it will be with fire. The implication here, as previously discussed, is that the treatment of blacks by whites, particularly in America, is the primary source of the evil that will trigger the next punishment.

The second title is taken from a poem by a black poet (for the entire quote see Section 1), and refers to the possibility of hope, freedom and redemption even when life seems at its most difficult. There is a certain sense of visual metaphor here. The speaker is entrapped in physical prison in the same way as, in the author's opinion, black people are entrapped in a socio-political-economic-spiritual prison. The overall reference of the quotation is to the possibility of hope for blacks even in the face of the most severe white oppression. The third title is another reference to a spiritual (see Section 2 Part 1), referring to sinners begging for redemption from Jesus Christ at the foot of the Cross where he was crucified. It carries with it what seems like an even stronger visual connotation than the second title - that of an agonized figure crouched before another. There is an evocation here of the figure of a black slave, crouched in agony before his white master - of the black Christian crouched in agony, having been denied his black identity in the way so vividly described by the author in Section 2 Part 1, before the white Christ - an image echoed in the quotation from page 98.

# Harlem

Harlem is a famous, perhaps infamous, borough of New York City in America, home to one of the largest concentrations of black Americans in the country, long a center of culture, crime and poverty.

# The Avenue

This is, in the author's descriptions, one of the main streets in Harlem, the scene of much of its criminal activity - prostitution and drug dealing in particular.

# The Nation of Islam

The Nation of Islam, founded by the self-proclaimed prophet Elijah Muhammad (see "Important People") was a sect of the Muslim faith followed and shaped predominantly by black Americans. It came to cultural-socio-political prominence in the early 1960's, preaching a doctrine of black racial supremacy and inevitable black power. It was the subject of careful legal scrutiny, of the perception that it valued violent overthrow of the white race, and of a great deal of fear.

# White American Society

White Americans are, throughout the novel and almost without exception, viewed as an oppressor, an enemy, and a source of socio-economic-spiritual-political suffering for blacks. It's important to note that the author has a certain degree of sympathy for them. Without absolving them of any of the acts of oppression they've undertaken over the years, he does acknowledge that whites are, in their own way, victims of their own preconceptions, belief systems, and fears.

# Elijah Muhammad's Home

This is the setting for the encounter between the author and Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, that takes up the bulk of Section 2, "Down at the Cross". It's described by the author as large and opulently decorated and furnished. As such is apparently similar to the homes of the popular Christian preachers whom the author condemns for having and spending money that their followers don't.

# Elijah Muhammad's Car

The author describes the car in similar terms to the house - large and expensive looking - with one additional detail. The car, he says, is "a gleaming, metallic, grossly American blue." There is the sense that while Elijah Muhammad fights one set of American values (i.e. the oppression of blacks by whites), he's more than willing to live by another set, that being that bigger and brighter means better.

# America

America, at least in the writings here, is defined by the author as a source of both profound hope and deep suffering - hope that the ideals upon which the country was founded will become reality, and suffering because they have not. These apparently contradictory attitudes are, in many ways, the warp and woof of the tapestry of black life in the United States.

# The Christian Church

In "Down at the Cross", Christianity is the focus of a sharp, almost condemnatory, examination by the author. He chronicles, from his own perspective and in considerable detail, the shortcomings of the faith and its ways and means of functioning in the world. He also describes how he still (perhaps paradoxically) retains

his teen-years born capacity for excitement and wonder when he experiences its traditions. Christianity is, throughout the book, tied almost inextricably together with white culture and oppression.

## The Rainbow

The rainbow appears in a quotation from an old black spiritual cited in the final paragraphs of "Down at the Cross". It's portrayed as a sign from God that he will never again cleanse the earth with water (i.e. a flood, like He did in Noah's time). In the later years of the Civil Rights Movement, which began in earnest a few years after this book was published the rainbow was adopted by the Movement's leaders as a symbol of the union for which they were striving. In the same way as the varied colors of the rainbow harmonize and blend into each other to create a beautiful whole, the Movement hoped that all the varied colors of the peoples of America could also blend to create beauty. This hope is expressed, in similar but not identical terms, by the author in the final paragraphs of both essays in the book.

# Themes

## The "Negro Problem"

The term "the Negro Problem" was used throughout the 1950's and 60's as a shorthand description of the ongoing state of racial tension (principally between black and white Americans) in America. The essays in "The Fire Next Time" both explore the problem, but from different perspectives. "My Dungeon Shook" anchors its analysis of the problem in the personal relationship between the author and his nephew. The author suggests that he agrees with the nephew that the situation is intolerable, but proposes that instead of reacting from a place of anger, the nephew (and by extension the black community as a whole) ought to strive for transforming the situation rather than confronting it violently. He suggests transformation of attitudes on both sides of the problem through the spreading love and understanding, to preserve the beauty that exists even in the midst of the pain and suffering of the Negro/black people. This idea is developed further in "Down at the Cross", an essay that has as its perspective the role that religious faith plays in perpetuating the problem. The author's particular focus here is on the way both Christianity and the form of Islam practiced in The Nation of Islam have, in their parallel of perspectives, triggered and nurtured a spirit of confrontation and oppression. They have failed to create a spirit of communication and transcendence. In both essays, the author carefully makes the point that the true, pure ideals of America (freedom, individuality, respect) are what both whites and blacks should be striving to live for, and in.

## The Shallowness and Ineffectiveness of Religious Faith

This theme is developed in conjunction with the first theme. The author contends, particularly in "Down at the Cross", that Christianity has failed both the blacks and the whites that both preach and practice it. He writes with what comes across as barely

concealed contempt, anger, and resentment of what he sees as the failings of Christianity, in terms of his personal experience and the general experience of the Negro/black people. It's important to note that he also suggests that Christianity has betrayed white people, whose capacity for true compassion and for open-mindedness has been short circuited by what they have been taught by those who shaped, and continue to lead, the Christian church. It's also important to note that the author makes this point in relation to non-Christian faiths as well - specifically, the version of Islam practiced by The Nation of Islam.

There are several parallels, drawn with what seems to be deliberate purpose, between the self-serving, self-satisfied leaders of both the Christian and Nation of Islam, between the self-blinding lack of realistic perspective of the followers of both faiths, and between what the author sees as the ultimate lack of effectiveness, in both faiths, in dealing with "the Negro Problem". In the author's mind, true resolution of the problem, and true healing within American society, can and will only be possible once individuals act outside the confines of their religious belief systems, using their experiences as individuals rather than believers to effect true and lasting transformation.

## Inter-Generational Influences and Relationships

This theme is explored throughout the novel, but receives the most emphasis in the shorter first essay, ostensibly composed by the author as a letter to his nephew. Specific manifestations of this theme include the way the nephew is described as being like both his father and his grandfather, both individuals for whom the author feels evident love and a simultaneous near-resentment for having, it seems, chosen to live a life of mental, spiritual, and emotional slavery (see "Quotes", pp. 18 and 19). This resentment carries over into the second essay, which in the second section contains a reference to a father figure, Elijah Muhammad. The author seems to regard him in the same way as he regards his father. For a while, he views Elijah Muhammad with a kind of respect, albeit with a tinge of suspicion. But as the two men spend more

time together, the author comes to see Elijah Muhammad as being more like his father than he originally thought. Respect turns to resentment, and suspicion turns to disappointment when he realizes that Elijah Muhammad is as trapped by perception as his father is. This sense of being trapped is at the core of the inter-generational relationships between the men in this book, with the warning to his nephew in the first essay essentially coming down to a warning to not become as trapped and as narrow in perspective as the older generations.

On the other hand, the brief portrayal of the nephew's grandmother (see "Quotes", p. 20) offers a contrasting portrayal of inter-generational relationship. There is clear respect and affection, bordering gently on awe, in the author's description of this woman (his mother). He believes she has somehow managed to transcend the pained narrowness of perspective that have plagued both his father and brother. He uses this woman's life as an example for the nephew of how to live. It is a way that does not forget the abuses Negroes have suffered at the hands of whites, but rather than becoming angry, works slowly and diligently and patiently to change perception and experience on both sides. This re-develops the book's primary theme relating to the Negro problem. In the example of the grandmother, there is a (somewhat idealized) example of the way the author suggests that Negro and white alike can transcend their troubles and make America truly great, and greatly true.

# Style

## Perspective

The first thing to note about the perspective of this book is the use of the terms "Negro" and "black" to identify members of what would, in contemporary language, be defined as the African American community. These essays were written at a time of linguistic transition in this area. The term "Negro", with all its racist connotations, was beginning to move out of common usage and be replaced with "black", which itself eventually moved out of common usage to be replaced by "African-American", a term which had yet to be coined at the time this book was written. The use of both "Negro" and "black" in this analysis reflects their usage in the book, which is in turn reflective of the racist, transitional state of society at the time. It's interesting to consider this variety of terminology in the context of the quotation on p. 98, in which the author refers to his name being originally given to him by the men who owned (as slaves) his ancestors. On the one hand, his identity is literally being defined by whites - as it is, or so he suggests, on the socio-cultural-political level.

Is it possible that the movement of the self-descriptive terms "Negro" to "black" to "African-American" reflects the movement of racial culture from a place of being defined by others to a stronger, clearer, more independent sense of SELF-definition? This is one of the author's key thematic points. Not only blacks, but whites as well, must define their identities and perspectives, not by what they've been told and not even by what they have experienced, but by what they hold as broad, humanist ideals. Is there anything more self-defining than the ideal that every human is equal, wanting and deserving the same rights and freedoms, experiencing the same joys and sorrows? The author's overall perspective, apparent in spite of his evident, perhaps justifiable anger, is that there is nothing more self-defining than an ideal - particularly the ideal of being American. In that sense, in spite of theer being strong evidence that the author is writing for a mostly Negro/black audience, there is also the sense that his ultimate message is intended for both black and white readers.

# Tone

Despite several apparent efforts at being objective, there is the overall sense that the author's writing is fueled by emotion. There is a very angry sense to its language, even in its moments of love and pleading (Section 1), of intellectual analysis (Section 2 Parts 1 and 3), and of relatively straightforward storytelling (Section 2 Part 2). The overall effect of this language is to create a sense of at times muted, at other times overt, bludgeoning. The author has a point to make, is determined to make it and has what seems to be perfectly valid reasons for that determination. Yet he seems to have allowed the emotional and/or experiential contexts for those reasons to affect his writing. The point must be made that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Blunt language is very often effective when waking readers up to an experience they have hitherto been unable, unwilling, or unprepared to have. The author no doubt feels he has to be blunt. He has to let people see his anger and fear and frustration and desperate love. In the first essay, he has to let his nephew see how much he cares and fears for him so the nephew will, hopefully, come to accept and understand what his uncle says he must do. The same principle applies in the second essay - the author evidently feels that blunt, direct language is what's necessary to shake both Negro and white Americans out of their self-induced moral, intellectual, spiritual and political delusions about themselves and their country. The question is, of course, whether this bluntness does what the other seems to want it to do, or whether it has the opposite effect - anger, as it were, begetting more anger. Another question - would the answer to the first question be different whether the reader was white or black?

# Structure

As previously discussed, the book is structured in two clearly delineated sections, each one consisting of a self-contained essay. The first, and much shorter, essay, is focused to convince the author's nephew (and perhaps, by extension, other young Negro/black men) to renounce anger and violence and make the changes to America they desire through other means. This idea is developed in the second essay, which is written in a

much less structured fashion. There are three clearly defined sections to this essay, each of which develops the book's main arguments and themes in its own way. But there is the sense that these sections are less rigidly focused, that in each section it takes a while for connections with the other two sections (and indeed with the first essay) to become apparent. There is also the sense that within each section there are apparent, and often lengthy diversions - that the author has been making a point, suddenly has an idea that he believes to be relevant to that point, develops that idea from its beginnings (without always keeping in mind his larger point), and ties it together at the end. In other words, structure in the second essay tends to ramble.

While this develops and defines a sense of creative energy, it also comes close to undermining the efficacy of the book's argument. It's interesting to consider this in terms of weaponry, a metaphor not entirely irrelevant to the book's scholarly perspective, emotional context, or socio-cultural foundations. In the first essay, the author is structurally shooting his intellectual gun at a firing range, taking one carefully aimed shot at a time, aiming at the same target and hoping to hit it in the same place at every shot. In the second essay, his structure is more like a spray of gunfire, a firing off of ideas and opinions and attitudes in random directions in the hope that one or more meet its target. In both cases, the target is a broader and deeper understanding of humanity, and is hit more directly, and more tellingly, as the result of the more tightly focused structure of the first essay.

# Quotes

"... [your grandfather] is dead, he never saw you, and he had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him ... you can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*." "My Dungeon Shook", p. 18.

"...no-one's hand can wipe away those tears [my brother] sheds invisibly today, which one hears in his laughter and in his speech and in his songs. I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it." "My Dungeon Shook", p. 19.

"Your grandmother was also there, and no one has ever accused her of being bitter. I suggest that the innocents check with her. She isn't hard to find. Your countrymen don't know that *she* exists ... though she has been working for them all their lives." "My Dungeon Shook", p. 20.

"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." "My Dungeon Shook", p. 21.

"Please try to be clear ... through the storm which rages about your youthful head today, about the reality which lies behind the words *acceptance* and *integration*. There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you.* The really terrible thing ... is that *you* must accept *them.*" "My Dungeon Shook", p. 22.

"... 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." "My Dungeon Shook", p. 23.

"... this is your home, my friend, do not be driven from it; great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become." "My Dungeon Shook", p. 24.

"...the wages of sin were visible everywhere, in every wine-stained and urine-splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin ... an indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow, agonizing death in a terrible small room; someone's bright son blown into eternity by his own hand; another turned robber and carried off to jail." "Down at the Cross", p. 34.

"Neither civilized reason nor Christian love would cause any of those people to treat you as they presumably wanted to be treated; only the fear of your power to retaliate would cause them to do that..." "Down at the Cross", p. 35.

"White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this - which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never - the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed." "Down at the Cross", p. 36.

"In spite of the Puritan-Yankee equation of virtue with well-being, Negroes had excellent reasons for doubting that money was made or kept by any very striking adherence to the Christian virtues." "Down at the Cross", p. 37.

"Negroes in this country - and Negroes do not, strictly or legally speaking, exist in any other - are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world." "Down at the Cross", p. 39

"The fear that I heard in my father's voice, for example, when he realized that I really *believed* I could do anything a white boy could do, and had every intention of proving it, was not at all like the fear I heard when one of us was ill or had fallen down the

stairs or strayed too far from the house. It was another fear, a fear that the child, in challenging the white world's assumptions, was putting himself in the path of destruction." p. 41.

"...I was also able to see that the principles governing the ... churches in which I grew up did not differ from the principles governing ... other churches, white. The principles were Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others. I would love to believe that the principles were Faith, Hope and Charity, but this is clearly not so for most Christians, or for what we call the Christian world." "Down at the Cross", p. 45

"There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord." "Down at the Cross", p. 47.

"To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread ... something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as deeply as they do here, and become as joyless as they have become." "Down at the Cross", p. 57.

"In the realm of power, Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty - necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith, the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels." "Down at the Cross", p. 59.

"It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being ... must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church." "Down at the Cross", p. 61.

"There [the police] stood, in twos and threes and fours, in their Cub Scout uniforms and with their Cub Scout faces, totally unprepared, as is the way with American he-men, for anything that could not be settled with a club or a fist or a gun." "Down at

the Cross", p. 62.

"Elijah Muhammad has been able to do what generations of welfare workers and committees and resolutions and reports and housing projects and playgrounds have failed to do: to heal and redeem drunkards and junkies, to convert people who have come out of prison and to keep them out, to make men chaste and women virtuous, and to invest both the male and the female with a pride and a serenity that hang about them like an unfailing light." "Down at the Cross", p. 65.

"We human beings now have the power to exterminate ourselves; this seems to be the entire sum of our achievement. We have taken this journey and arrived at this place in God's name. This, then, is the best that God (the white God) can do. If that is so, then it is time to replace Him - replace him with what? And this void, this despair, this torment is felt everywhere in the West, from the streets of Stockholm to the churches of New Orleans and the sidewalks of Harlem." "Down at the Cross", p. 71.

"The sunlight came into the room with the peacefulness one remembers from rooms in one's early childhood - a sunlight encountered later only in one's dreams." "Down at the Cross", p. 76.

"Most Negroes cannot risk assuming that the humanity of white people is more real to them than their color. And this leads, imperceptibly but inevitably, to a state of mind in which, having long ago learned to expect the worst, one finds it very easy to believe the worst." "Down at the Cross", p. 82.

"...in order to change a situation one has first to see it for what it is: in the present case, to accept the fact, whatever one does with it thereafter, that the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or for worse, and does not belong to any other - not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam. The paradox ... is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past." "Down at the Cross", p. 95.

"I am called Baldwin because I was either sold by my African tribe or kidnapped out of it into the hands of a white Christian named Baldwin, who forced me to kneel at the foot of the cross. I am, then, both visibly and legally the descendant of slaves in a white, Protestant country, and this is what it means to be an American Negro ..." "Down at the Cross", p. 98.

"There are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves. People are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior. And this human truth has an especially grinding force here [in America] where identity is almost impossible to achieve and people are perpetually attempting to find their feet on the shifting sands of status." "Down at the Cross", p. 102.

"Privately, we cannot stand our lives and dare not examine them; domestically we take no responsibility for (and no pride in) what goes on in our country; and internationally, for many millions of people, we are an unmitigated disaster." "Down at the Cross", p. 103.

"Life is tragic simply because the earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have." "Down at the Cross", p. 105.

"The only way [the white man] can be released from the Negro's tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to become black himself, to become a part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveler's checks, visits surreptitiously after dark." "Down at the Cross", p. 110.

# Topics for Discussion

Consider the views of Christianity discussed by the author throughout the second essay, "Down at the Cross". Debate the truth or falsity of these views.

Consider the author's reaction to his meeting with Elijah Muhammad (Section 2, Part 2). Discuss whether it's possible to have a full, pure experience solely within one context. Would it have been possible for the author to listen to Elijah Muhammad only as black man, and not as his father's son, as an American, and not a black man, as a black American, and not a man? Speculate on how his reactions might have differed if he had been able to separate the various components of his personality and experience. Discuss whether such separation is either possible or advisable.

Consider the author's examination of, and commentary on, the Nazi extermination of the Jews (Section 2, Part 2). Consider particularly the juxtaposition of this examination with his examination of the Nation of Islam, with its avowed determination to exterminate the white race from America. What are the parallels between these two extreme perspectives? What are the differences? Can genocide ever be reasonably regarded as justified by circumstances?

Discuss the meaning of the statement "Negroes do not, strictly or legally speaking, exist in any other [country than America]". Is this statementrue or false? What defines a Negro? What makes black people, who don't live in America, different? Why would black Africans, for example, not be considered Negro?

Consider this quotation from p. 103 - "Privately, [Americans] cannot stand our lives and dare not examine them; domestically we take no responsibility for (and no pride in) what goes on in our country; and internationally, for many millions of people, we are an unmitigated disaster." Is this statement true or false? In what other contexts might this statement apply? If the statement is true, what has or can be done to change America's perspective on itself? If the statement is false, what are the flaws in the

author's reasoning that have led him to this perspective?

Imagine a dinner party similar to the one described in Section 2 Part 2, but with this difference: the author has brought some of his trusted, enlightened white friends. Create a dialogue between these friends, the author, Elijah Muhammad, and Elijah Muhammad's supporters. How would the discussions develop? What might some of the young white men say to the young black men? What might Elijah Muhammad say? Would the author contribute more actively to the conversation than he does to the conversation at the dinner party here? Make one or two of the white guests women. How might they react to the black men? How might they react to the relative subservience and silence of the white women? Dramatize this meeting - improvise dialogue - role play.

Write a series of letters in response to the author's letter to his nephew. These letters might include, but not be limited to, a letter from the nephew to the author after the first letter has been read ... a letter from the nephew's father to his brother (the author), either taking issue with or supporting the author's action ... a letter from the grandmother to the author, the nephew, the brother ... a letter from the nephew to the grandmother ... etc.