

My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew

Open Letter by James Baldwin

COMMON CORE

RI 1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain. **RI 6** Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text. **LSa** Interpret figures of speech (e.g., paradox) in context and analyze their role in the text.

DID YOU KNOW?

James Baldwin ...

- was mentored by poet Countee Cullen in high school.
- moved to Paris at age 24 and only returned to the United States for visits.
- was working on a biography of Martin Luther King Jr., when he died.

(background) Harlem in 1937

Meet the Author

James Baldwin 1924–1987

In the turbulent 1960s, James Baldwin became one of the country's most sought-after commentators on racial politics. But Baldwin never considered himself a spokesperson. Rather, he saw his role as bearing witness "to whence I came, where I am . . . to what I've seen and the possibilities that I think I see." This autobiographical vantage point is the hallmark of Baldwin's greatest works, from his moving first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), to the provocative essays collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), and *The Fire Next Time* (1963).

Early Struggles Born and raised in Harlem, Baldwin never knew his biological father and had a strained relationship with his stepfather, a domineering, bitter man who preached at a storefront evangelical church on weekends. A star pupil and voracious reader, the young James also helped his overworked mother raise his eight brothers and sisters. After a dramatic religious conversion at age 14, he gained local acclaim as a "boy-preacher." Then, at 18, a crisis of faith drove Baldwin to break with the church and leave home.

Emerging Artist

Working to establish his literary career, Baldwin

supported himself by writing book reviews and waiting tables. Baldwin achieved some success but felt increasingly stifled by the racist climate of the United States. In a life-changing decision in 1948, he bought a one-way plane ticket to Paris. "Once I found myself on the other side of the ocean," he later explained, "I could see where I came from very clearly, and I could see that I carried myself, which is my home, with me. You can never escape that."

Long-Distance Outrage With their penetrating insight and apocalyptic tone, Baldwin's essay collections were bestsellers. By the mid-1960s, he was an international celebrity, popular on the lecture circuit and in public debates, interviews, and panel discussions in the United States and Europe. In writing about his perceptions and personal torments, Baldwin made white Americans deeply, painfully aware of the realities of African-American life. As black leaders in the 1950s and 1960s looked outward to break down barriers, Baldwin looked inward to examine the psychological damage of racism and the search for black identity and self-realization. In the words of playwright Amiri Baraka, "Jimmy's voice, as much as Dr. King's or Malcolm X's, helped shepherd and guide us toward black liberation."

Author Online

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My Dungeon Shook

Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation

James Baldwin

BACKGROUND In 1963, as the nation's perspective on the race problem grew more pessimistic, James Baldwin published his essay collection *The Fire Next Time*. Expressing the pain and anger that African Americans had concealed for so long, Baldwin addressed his provocative essays to a sympathetic white audience that had failed to grasp the full magnitude of racial injustice. His searing attack fit the national mood, and the collection soared up the bestseller lists. Its success made Baldwin an icon of black rage and a widely televised commentator on racial issues throughout the 1960s. The following letter, taken from *The Fire Next Time*, captures the extremes of Baldwin's style: the righteous anger that made him famous and his fervent belief in the redeeming power of love.

Analyze Visuals ►

Describe the story that this painting seems to tell. Which elements help the artist connect the two figures in the foreground with the main story of the painting?

Dear James:

I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times. I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother. Like him, you are tough, dark, vulnerable, moody—with a very definite tendency to sound **truculent** because you want no one to think you are soft. You may be like your grandfather in this, I don't know, but certainly both you and your father resemble him very much physically. Well, he 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. This is one of the reasons that he became so holy.¹ I am sure that your father has told you something about all that. Neither you nor your father exhibit any tendency towards holiness: you really *are*

truculent (trūk'yə-lənt)
adj. eager for a fight;
fierce

1. **so holy:** Baldwin's stepfather was a minister who raised his children in a strict, conservative, religious environment.



of another era, part of what happened when the Negro left the land and came into what the late E. Franklin Frazier² called “the cities of destruction.” You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*. I tell you this because I love you, and please don’t you ever forget it.

I have known both of you all your lives, have carried your Daddy in my arms and on my shoulders, kissed and spanked him and watched him learn to walk. I don’t know if you’ve known anybody from that far back; if you’ve loved anybody that long, first as an infant, then as a child, then as a man, you gain a strange
20 perspective on time and human pain and effort. Other people cannot see what I see whenever I look into your father’s face, for behind your father’s face as it is today are all those other faces which were his. Let him laugh and I see a cellar your father does not remember and a house he does not remember and I hear in his present laughter his laughter as a child. Let him curse and I remember him falling down the cellar steps, and howling, and I remember, with pain, his tears, which my hand or your grandmother’s so easily wiped away. But no one’s hand can wipe away those tears he 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. And I know, which is much worse, and this is
30 the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be, indeed one must strive to become, tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. (But remember: *most* of mankind is not all of mankind.) But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which **constitutes** the crime. **A**

Now, my dear namesake, these innocent and well-meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not very far removed
40 from those described for us by Charles Dickens³ in the London of more than a hundred years ago. (I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming, “No! This is not true! How *bitter* you are!”—but I am writing this letter to *you*, to try to tell you something about how to handle *them*, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist. I *know* the conditions under which you were born, for I was there. Your countrymen were *not* there, and haven’t made it yet. 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, either, though she has been working for them all their lives.)

Well, you were born, here you came, something like fifteen years ago; and
50 though your father and mother and grandmother, looking about the streets through which they were carrying you, staring at the walls into which they brought you, had every reason to be heavyhearted, yet they were not. For here

Language Coach

Word Definitions

Shed tears means

“lose tears” or “cry.”

What does Baldwin

mean by “tears he sheds

invisibly” (line 27)? What

are invisible tears?

constitute (kŏn’stĭ-tōōt’)

v. to amount to; equal

A RHETORICAL DEVICES

Consider the **paradox** in lines 36–37. What point is Baldwin making?

2. **E. Franklin Frazier:** African-American sociologist (1894–1962) who studied the structure of black communities.

3. **described . . . by Charles Dickens:** Dickens (1812–1870) was a British novelist whose works frequently described the hardships suffered by the poor in London.

you were, Big James, named for me—you were a big baby, I was not—here you were: to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever, to strengthen you against the loveless world. Remember that: I know how black it looks today, for you. It looked bad that day, too, yes, we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children's children. **B**

- 60 This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with **mediocrity**. Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and *how*
- 70 you could do it) and where you could live and whom you could marry. I know your countrymen do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying, “You exaggerate.” They do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you. Take no one’s word for anything, including mine—but trust your experience.

- Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit **C** to where you can go. The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear. Please try to be clear, dear James, through the storm which rages about your youthful head
- 80 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, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know.
- 90 To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one’s sense of one’s own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations. You, don’t be afraid. I said that it was intended that you should perish in the ghetto, perish by never

B RHETORICAL DEVICES

Identify words and phrases that are repeated in lines 52–59. What does this **repetition** contribute to the paragraph’s impact?

mediocrity

(mē’dē-ōk’-rĭ-tē) *n.* lack of quality or excellence

C IDENTIFY PURPOSE

Reread lines 60–74. What is Baldwin’s main point? How do these ideas add to your understanding of his purpose for writing?

impertinent

(ĭm-pûr’tn-ənt) *adj.* rude; ill-mannered

Language Coach

Synonyms A **synonym** is a word with a meaning similar to that of another word. As they are used in line 96, *fixed* and *immovable* are synonyms. How do these synonyms emphasize the non-changing “role” the black man had played?



Thinking (1990), Carlton Murrell. Oil on board. Private collection. © Bridgeman Art Library.

being allowed to go behind the white man's definitions, by never being allowed to
 100 spell your proper name. You have, and many of us have, defeated this intention;
 and, by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your
 imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. But these men are
 your brothers—your lost, younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means
 anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to
 see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it.
 For 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. It will be hard, James, but you come from sturdy, peasant stock, men
 who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads, and, in the teeth of⁴
 110 the most terrifying odds, achieved an **unassailable** and monumental dignity. You
 come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One
 of them said, *The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains*
*fell off.*⁵ **D**

You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of
 freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free. God
 bless you, James, and Godspeed.

Your uncle,
 James

unassailable
 (ŭn'ə-sā'lə-bəl) *adj.*
 undeniable

D IDENTIFY PURPOSE
 Reread lines 100–113.
 Which sentence best
 states Baldwin's purpose
 in these lines?

4. **in the teeth of:** in spite of.

5. **The very time . . . fell off:** a quotation from the traditional spiritual "My Dungeon Shook." It alludes to the Biblical story of Paul and Silas (Acts 16), who were freed from an unjust imprisonment by the action of an earthquake.