Civil Rights and Protest Literature

My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew
Open Letter by James Baldwin

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.”

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
Support

Hold Back

1. With hard work you can achieve your dreams (my mom).
2. College is too expensive and not worth it (my friend George).

What protects your sense of SELF?

Part of growing up is deciding who you want to be and how to make your vision a reality. But how do you keep your sense of self strong when others tell you who you can and cannot be? James Baldwin offers his nephew some advice on protecting his self-worth from the crushing forces of racism.

QUICKWRITE

Think about the messages you get about yourself from family, friends, media, and other sources. Which ones support you and which ones seem to hold you back? List at least two examples in each category. Based on your list, what in your life most helps you protect your self-worth?

TEXT ANALYSIS: RHETORICAL DEVICES

Baldwin is known for his passionate and poetic style, which is based on his skillful use of rhetorical devices. Baldwin uses these techniques to drive home his points and to create rhythmic effects that echo spoken language:

- A paradox is a statement that seems contradictory but really points to an important truth. Baldwin uses this device to push his readers to think more deeply about familiar ideas.

  It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.

- Repetition is the use of the same word, phrase, or sentence more than once for emphasis. Baldwin uses repetition expressively, to convey deep emotions.

  You must accept them and accept them with love... .

As you read, note the rhetorical devices Baldwin uses, and consider their effects.

READING STRATEGY: IDENTIFY PURPOSE

Baldwin's sentences do more than simply explain his points; they stir powerful emotional responses in the reader. Often, the meaning of his statements becomes apparent only after careful thought and reflection. As you read this letter, study Baldwin's purpose for writing. In a chart like the one below, note key sentences that convey Baldwin's purpose. Then, after you have finished the letter, summarize the reasons why Baldwin wrote this letter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baldwin's Sentence</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Baldwin uses the following words in his eloquent appeal. Complete each sentence with one of the words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORD LIST</th>
<th>constitute</th>
<th>mediocrity</th>
<th>unassailable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>impertinent</td>
<td>truculent</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1. You conceal your fears with a(n) _____ attitude.
2. Don't settle for _____; strive for excellence.
3. It is never _____ to speak honestly.
4. Know exactly what tasks and obligations _____ your duty.
5. Let your convictions be strong and your truth _______.

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
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.

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

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

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?

truculent (trük’ya-lunt) adj. eager for a fight; fierce

Father, Charly Palmer. Mixed media collage on wood. 18” x 12”. © Charly Palmer.
of another era, part of what happened when the Negro left the land and came into what the late E. Franklin Frazier\(^2\) called “the cities of destruction.” You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a \textit{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 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 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: \textit{most} of mankind is not \textit{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 from those described for us by Charles Dickens\(^3\) in the London of more than a hundred years ago. (I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming, “No! This is not true! How \textit{bitter} you are!”—but I am writing this letter to \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{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 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

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\(^3\) 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.

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 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 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 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. 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
being allowed to go behind the white man's definitions, by never being allowed to
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 of
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
dfell off.*

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

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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.
Comprehension

1. Recall In Baldwin’s view, why was the boy’s grandfather defeated?
2. Recall What does Baldwin say acceptance means?
3. Clarify What crime does Baldwin accuse his country of committing?

Text Analysis

4. Identify Purpose Review the sentences you recorded in your chart. Which one best conveys the purpose of this letter? Explain your answer.

5. Examine Rhetorical Devices Baldwin sums up the themes of his letter with two concluding paradoxes. Reread lines 114–115. What perspective on the problem of race in America do these two statements convey?

6. Analyze Audience Baldwin addressed this open letter to his 15-year-old nephew but published it in The Fire Next Time. In each of the following passages, which details are directed to the nephew and which seem directed to a wider audience? Support your answer with details.
   - Baldwin’s memories of his brother (lines 20–33)
   - criticisms of his readers (lines 38–44)
   - his advice to his nephew (lines 78–84)
   - his description of whites’ fears (lines 90–97)

7. Compare Style Baldwin shared many of Martin Luther King Jr.’s values, goals, and religious influences. What is similar and different about the authors’ styles? In your answer, consider each author’s tone as well as his use of logical arguments, allusions, and rhetorical devices.

8. Make Judgments Consider Baldwin’s solution to the problem of racism. In your opinion, does Baldwin’s letter contain useful advice for protecting his nephew’s self-worth? Explain your opinions.

Text Criticism

9. Critical Interpretations In Soul on Ice (1968), black activist Eldridge Cleaver criticized James Baldwin for his “grueling, agonizing, total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself” and his “shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites.” Do you see any evidence to support these accusations? Explain your answer, citing details from Baldwin’s letter.

What protects your sense of SELF?

Sometimes people’s view of themselves is too high. At other times, they suffer from low self-esteem. In your opinion, what is a good balance between these two extremes? How do you keep a proper perspective on yourself?
Vocabulary in Context

**VOCABULARY PRACTICE**

Choose the word that is closest in meaning to the boldfaced vocabulary word.

1. **impertinent**: (a) insolent, (b) impossible, (c) unfriendly
2. **mediocrity**: (a) ordinariness, (b) indifference, (c) complexity
3. **unassailable**: (a) landlocked, (b) unknown, (c) indisputable
4. **truculent**: (a) uncivilized, (b) ferocious, (c) boorish
5. **constitute**: (a) connect, (b) compose, (c) conclude

**ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING**

- complex  - economic  - establish  - ethnic  - evolve

James Baldwin wrote a letter to his nephew offering advice about how to live in a complex society. In a short paragraph, discuss where you seek advice. Use at least two Academic Vocabulary words in your writing.

**VOCABULARY STRATEGY: CONTEXT AND THE MEANING OF IDIOMS**

An **idiom** is an expression whose overall meaning is different from the meaning of the individual words that it includes. For example, in “My Dungeon Shook” Baldwin uses the expression *in the teeth of* to describe overcoming difficult odds. Some idioms are very common and you will automatically know their meaning. However, if an idiom is unfamiliar to you, you may at first try to determine the meaning of the sentence or paragraph by focusing on the meanings of the individual words. Only by looking at the surrounding context will you be able to draw the conclusion that the words are working together as a part of an idiom with a special meaning.

**PRACTICE** Use context clues to identify the five idioms in the following paragraph and determine their meaning. Then, write the meaning, or a definition, of each idiom.

No matter what trouble she’s in, she always gets herself off the hook. Even when she creates a disaster for everyone else, she gets away without any egg on her face. Sometimes her mistakes are just a matter of putting her foot in her mouth. At other times she actually thumbs her nose at other people’s needs and concerns. We can only hope that someone will take her under his wing and teach her how to behave.
The March Toward Equality

In 1963, psychology professor Dr. Kenneth Clark conducted a series of interviews with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and James Baldwin. Aired during a time of intense racial conflict, these interviews explored the differences in the ideals and world views of these three leading activists and thinkers. In his introduction to the interviews, Dr. Clark made this statement.

“We have now come to the point where there are only two ways that America can avoid continued racial explosions. One would be total oppression. The other, total equality. There is no compromise. I believe, I hope, that we are on the threshold of a truly democratic America. It is not going to be easy to cross that threshold. But the achievement of the goals of justice, equality, and democracy for all American citizens involves the very destiny of our nation.”

Writing to Persuade

Consider the state of civil rights in America today, in light of the goals and visions of the writers you have just read. In your opinion, have we reached total equality? Or would you say that we have arrived somewhere in between total equality and total oppression? Review the literature in this section and write a retrospective editorial in which you support a claim about whether or not the goals and visions of these writers have been realized.

Consider

• which ideas and details from the selections will help you articulate the vision of the civil rights leaders
• what stories, examples, or other details will help you support your view of civil rights in America today
• who your audience will be and what you want them to think or do
• how to express your argument clearly and respectfully

Extension Online

INQUIRY & RESEARCH Use the Internet to research contemporary topics in civil rights. Look for news and commentary in mainstream and lesser-known publications, including private blogs. Also look for Web sites of organizations devoted to advancing civil rights. Choose three issues that seem important or surprising to you and share them with your class.

COMMON CORE

RI 9 Analyze documents of historical and literary significance for their themes and purposes. W 1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts. W 9a–b Apply grade 11 Reading standards to literature and to literary nonfiction.