

About *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin (The following passage was taken from www.supersummary.com)

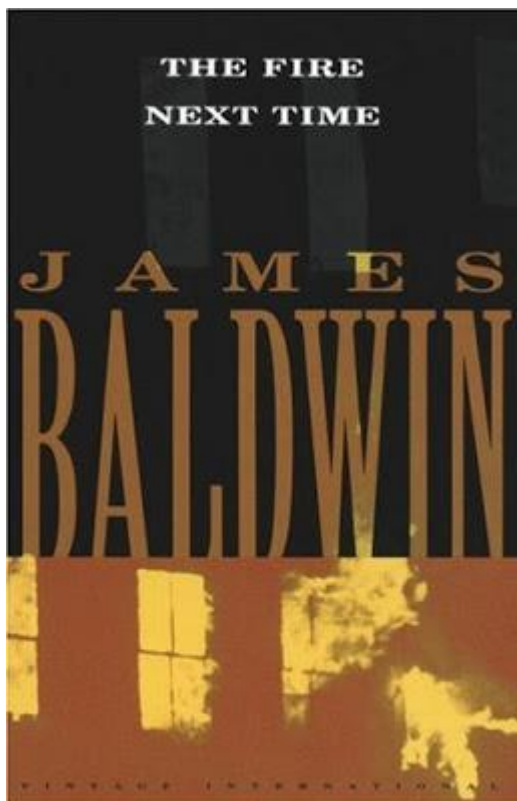
“James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963) comprises two autobiographical essays in which the author confronts the racial issues and tensions that he believes corrupt and deform American life and the American dream. Baldwin’s essays exemplify and precursor many of the elements and arguments central to the Civil Rights movement. Please note: Throughout the text, Baldwin uses the racial labels/language common at the time he was writing. This study guide, which uses the Vintage Reissue Edition of the text, quotes and obscures the author’s use of the n-word.

Summary

These **epistolary** essays co-opt the letter format to create a sense of immediacy and connection between the writer and the **audience**. This strategy is particularly effective in the first essay—“My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation”—addressed to Baldwin’s nephew, James, named after the author by the author’s brother. The reader immediately becomes a stand-in for the addressee—James, a proud, intelligent, and angry young man, beloved by his uncle. In this letter, Baldwin urges his nephew not to allow himself to become enraged over the systemic, legal, and socioeconomic discrimination meted out by the White elite power structure, but instead to adopt a more universal, even compassionate, view of racial tensions.

The second essay—“Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in my Mind”—is addressed to a broader audience, and its **tone** is reminiscent of a preacher’s sermon. In this essay, Baldwin **exploits** several important **rhetorical** devices through the co-option of both the epistolary and sermonic rhetorical structures that deepen his theme: Christianity and Islam hamper African Americans from demanding equality and civil rights. Baldwin’s condemnation of both the church and the mosque is structured as a rhetorical examination in which Baldwin logically supports his points using examples from his life. These examples of his emotional, metaphysical, and spiritual struggle act as the philosophical argument that ultimately condemns Christianity as a tool of a “white God” that encourages African Americans to wait to be rewarded for their current suffering in heaven. However, the “black God” offered by Islam fares no better in Baldwin’s

estimation; primarily because it too fails to demand or to achieve justice, instead focusing on the wrongs committed by the “white devils,” condemning White people as automatic enemies of all African Americans and reducing the argument to an “us versus them” **polemic**. Baldwin’s essays educate all people, but in particular White people, as to the realities of African American experience in the United States to create change where he can. Through the humanizing first-person viewpoint, Baldwin **exhorts**, inspires, and enjoins all human beings to aspire to justice and equality for all, wherein integration is not the end goal but instead a co-creation of equality. He advocates consciousness-raising rather than revolution.”



Excerpt from *The Fire Next Time* (1962) by James Baldwin (1924 – 1984)

James Baldwin: "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!"

“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 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."