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Summer Reading Assignment for INTD100: Coffee and Black Holes

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1. *This essay is in a narrative style, and is broken into several parts. Summarize part I in one paragraph, using 120 words or fewer. Note: The purpose of this exercise is to complete the summary in no more than a certain number of words. What key moments stand out in your mind? What is the central realization of the author at the end of the section?*

*Notes of a Native Son* begins with the author, James Baldwin, discussing the gradual decline and death of his father. Baldwin depicts the bitterness, primarily against white people, that plagued his father by using an example of his father's constant distrust of a white teacher despite her offering to educate Baldwin. Baldwin does not understand the cause nor depth of his father's bitterness until he visits New Jersey where he experiences segregation first-hand. Part one culminates in Baldwin deliberately going to a whites-only restaurant in order to start a fight. After escaping, he realizes he had been fully ready to commit murder and accepts that he needs to address the hatred in his heart in order to keep himself safe.

2. *Repeat exercise 1, but instead use only twenty words. What happens in part I of the essay?*

James Baldwin describes the effects of living in Harlem and New Jersey during a time of extreme segregation and discrimination.

3. *Consider part III. Construct a tract of writing that a) defines and explains the poison metaphor the author describes at the funeral of his father, b) identifies the author's "cure" or cures for the poison, and c) provides several pieces of supporting evidence for the identification of the author's cure.*

Throughout *Notes of a Native Son*, James Baldwin uses poison as a metaphor for deep bitterness caused by experiencing racism. In the beginning of his essay, Baldwin explains that growing up he did not understand his father's bitterness. However, after a year of living in New Jersey, where he experienced segregation for the first time, Baldwin understands what sickened his father and becomes a victim to it himself. In part three he explains that in that year he was away, he "...had time to become aware of the meaning of all my father's bitter warnings, had discovered the secret of his proudly pursed lips and rigid carriage: I had discovered the weight of white people in the world, I saw that this had been for my ancestors and now would be for me an awful thing to live with and that the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me." This quote demonstrates that the realization of the true extent of oppression in the world made him finally understand the bitterness that poisoned his father. This quote also shows that Baldwin does not believe that there is a cure to this poison, as he

has already resigned himself to the same fate as his father. He repeats this same sentiment again in part one, saying “[t]hat year in New Jersey lives in my mind as though it were the year during which, having an unsuspected predilection for it, I first contracted some dread, chronic disease...There is not a Negro alive who does not have this rage in his blood—one has the choice, merely, of living with it consciously or surrendering to it. As for me, this fever has recurred in me, and does, and will until the day I die.” Baldwin is again attributing the onset of the poison, or in this case, “disease,” to his year in New Jersey and that he will suffer from it for the remainder of his life.

4. *Consider the final part of the essay, when the author describes the fight in the Hotel Braddock. Write a tract of between 200-400 words on the author’s treatment of evidence and facts. What does the author have to say about the importance of facts about the fight to the people in that neighborhood? Notice the author’s writing takes on the tone of a reporter regarding the ensuing riot. What facts stand out regarding the outcome?*

In the final part of his essay, James Baldwin describes a fight in the Hotel Braddock between a white police officer and a black soldier over a black woman. Rumors of the soldier being killed from a shot in the back spread around Harlem immediately, triggering riots all across the neighborhood. Despite the truth being that the soldier was not shot in the back and was alive, this incident was the final straw as incidents like this had happened before. Baldwin shows that the importance of the facts about the fight were irrelevant as all the neighborhood needed was a spark to light their pent up frustrations of the discrimination and racism they faced. It wouldn’t matter if evidence of the truth was presented to the masses because “...no one was interested in the facts. They preferred the invention because this invention expressed and corroborated their hates and fears so perfectly.” Baldwin highlights key details of the riots, such as that they stayed within the confines of the neighborhood, white businesses were the primary targets of destruction, stores were smashed open, and glass and goods were scattered. Regardless of what actually transpired on that night at the Hotel Braddock, the outcome would have been the same “for Harlem had needed something to smash.”