Many Thousands Gone

It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear. As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence; and the story is told, compulsively, in symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics; it is revealed in Negro speech and in that of the white majority and in their different frames of reference. The ways in which the Negro has affected the American psychology are betrayed in our popular culture and in our morality; in our estrangement from him is the depth of our estrangement from ourselves. We cannot ask: what do we *really* feel about him—such a question merely opens the gates on chaos. What we really feel about him is involved with all that we feel about everything, about everyone, about ourselves.

The story of the Negro in America is the story of America—or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans. It is not a very pretty story: the story of a people is never very pretty. The Negro in America, gloomily referred to as that shadow which lies athwart our national life, is far more than that. He is a series of shadows, self-created, intertwining, which now we helplessly battle. One may say that the Negro in America does not really exist except in the darkness of our minds.

This is why his history and his progress, his relationship to all other Americans, has been kept in the social arena. He is a social and not a personal or a human problem; to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence; it is to be confronted with an endless cataloguing of losses, gains, skirmishes; it is to feel virtuous, outraged, helpless, as though his continuing status among us were somehow analogous to disease—cancer, perhaps, or tuberculosis—which must be checked, even though it cannot be cured. In this arena the black man acquires quite another aspect from that which he has in life. We do

not know what to do with him in life; if he breaks our sociological and sentimental image of him we are panic-stricken and we feel ourselves betrayed. When he violates this image, therefore, he stands in the greatest danger (sensing which, we uneasily suspect that he is very often playing a part for our benefit); and, what is not always so apparent but is equally true, we are then in some danger ourselves—hence our retreat or our blind and immediate retaliation.

Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his. Time and our own force act as our allies, creating an impossible, a fruitless tension between the traditional master and slave. Impossible and fruitless because, literal and visible as this tension has become, it has nothing to do with reality.

Time has made some changes in the Negro face. Nothing has succeeded in making it exactly like our own, though the general desire seems to be to make it blank if one cannot make it white. When it has become blank, the past as thoroughly washed from the black face as it has been from ours, our guilt will be finished—at least it will have ceased to be visible, which we imagine to be much the same thing. But, paradoxically, it is we who prevent this from happening; since it is we, who, every hour that we live, reinvest the black face with our guilt; and we do this—by a further paradox, no less ferocious—helplessly, passionately, out of an unrealized need to suffer absolution.

Today, to be sure, we know that the Negro is not biologically or mentally inferior; there is no truth in those rumors of his body odor or his incorrigible sexuality; or no more truth than can be easily explained or even defended by the social sciences. Yet, in our most recent war, his blood was segregated as was, for the most part, his person. Up to today we are set at a division, so that he may not marry our daughters or our sisters, nor may he—for the most part—eat at our tables or live in our houses. Moreover, those who do, do so at the grave expense of a double alienation: from their own people, whose fabled attributes they must either deny or, worse, cheapen and bring to market; from us, for we require of them, when we accept them, that they at once cease to be Negroes and yet not fail to remember what being a Negro means—to remember, that is, what it means to us. The threshold of insult is higher

or lower, according to the people involved, from the bootblack in Atlanta to the celebrity in New York. One must travel very far, among saints with nothing to gain or outcasts with nothing to lose, to find a place where it does not matter—and perhaps a word or a gesture or simply a silence will testify that it matters even there.

For it means something to be a Negro, after all, as it means something to have been born in Ireland or in China, to live where one sees space and sky or to live where one sees nothing but rubble or nothing but high buildings. We cannot escape our origins, however hard we try, those origins which contain the key—could we but find it—to all that we later become. What it means to be a Negro is a good deal more than this essay can discover; what it means to be a Negro in America can perhaps be suggested by an examination of the myths we perpetuate about him.

Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead, their places taken by a group of amazingly well-adjusted young men and women, almost as dark, but ferociously literate, well-dressed and scrubbed, who are never laughed at, who are not likely ever to set foot in a cotton or tobacco field or in any but the most modern of kitchens. There are others who remain, in our odd idiom, "underprivileged"; some are bitter and these come to grief; some are unhappy, but, continually presented with the evidence of a better day soon to come, are speedily becoming less so. Most of them care nothing whatever about race. They want only their proper place in the sun and the right to be left alone, like any other citizen of the republic. We may all breathe more easily. Before, however, our joy at the demise of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom approaches the indecent, we had better ask whence they sprang, how they lived? Into what limbo have they vanished?

However inaccurate our portraits of them were, these portraits do suggest, not only the conditions, but the quality of their lives and the impact of this spectacle on our consciences. There was no one more forbearing than Aunt Jemima, no one stronger or more pious or more loyal or more wise; there was, at the same time, no one weaker or more faithless or more vicious and certainly no one more immoral. Uncle Tom, trustworthy and sexless, needed only to drop the title "Uncle" to become violent, crafty, and sullen, a menace to any white woman who passed by. They prepared our feast tables and our burial clothes; and, if

we could boast that we understood them, it was far more to the point and far more true that they understood us. They were, moreover, the only people in the world who did; and not only did they know us better than we knew ourselves, but they knew us better than we knew them. This was the piquant flavoring to the national joke, it lay behind our uneasiness as it lay behind our benevolence: Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, our creations, at the last evaded us; they had a life—their own, perhaps a better life than ours—and they would never tell us what it was. At the point where we were driven most privately and painfully to conjecture what depths of contempt, what heights of indifference, what prodigies of resilience, what untamable superiority allowed them so vividly to endure, neither perishing nor rising up in a body to wipe us from the earth, the image perpetually shattered and the word failed. The black man in our midst carried murder in his heart, he wanted vengeance. We carried murder too, we wanted peace.

In our image of the Negro breathes the past we deny, not dead but living yet and powerful, the beast in our jungle of statistics. It is this which defeats us, which continues to defeat us, which lends to interracial cocktail parties their rattling, genteel, nervously smiling air: in any drawing room at such a gathering the beast may spring, filling the air with flying things and an unenlightened wailing. Wherever the problem touches there is confusion, there is danger. Wherever the Negro face appears a tension is created, the tension of a silence filled with things unutterable. It is a sentimental error, therefore, to believe that the past is dead; it means nothing to say that it is all forgotten, that the Negro himself has forgotten it. It is not a question of memory. Oedipus did not remember the thongs that bound his feet; nevertheless the marks they left testified to that doom toward which his feet were leading him. The man does not remember the hand that struck him, the darkness that frightened him, as a child; nevertheless, the hand and the darkness remain with him, indivisible from himself forever, part of the passion that drives him wherever he thinks to take flight.

The making of an American begins at that point where he himself rejects all other ties, any other history, and himself adopts the vesture of his adopted land. This problem has been faced by all Americans throughout

our history—in a way it *is* our history—and it baffles the immigrant and sets on edge the second generation until today. In the case of the Negro the past was taken from him whether he would or no; yet to forswear it was meaningless and availed him nothing, since his shameful history was carried, quite literally, on his brow. Shameful; for he was heathen as well as black and would never have discovered the healing blood of Christ had not we braved the jungles to bring him these glad tidings. Shameful; for, since our role as missionary had not been wholly disinterested, it was necessary to recall the shame from which we had delivered him in order more easily to escape our own. As he accepted the alabaster Christ and the bloody cross—in the bearing of which he would find his redemption, as, indeed, to our outraged astonishment, he sometimes did—he must, henceforth, accept that image we then gave him of himself: having no other and standing, moreover, in danger of death should he fail to accept the dazzling light thus brought into such darkness. It is this quite simple dilemma that must be borne in mind if we wish to comprehend his psychology.

However we shift the light which beats so fiercely on his head, or *prove,* by victorious social analysis, how his lot has changed, how we have both improved, our uneasiness refuses to be exorcized. And nowhere is this more apparent than in our literature on the subject —"problem" literature when written by whites, "protest" literature when written by Negroes—and nothing is more striking than the tremendous disparity of tone between the two creations. *Kingsblood Royal* bears, for example, almost no kinship to *If He Hollers Let Him Go,* though the same reviewers praised them both for what were, at bottom, very much the same reasons. These reasons may be suggested, far too briefly but not at all unjustly, by observing that the presupposition is in both novels exactly the same: black is a terrible color with which to be born into the world.

Now the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America is unquestionably Richard Wright's *Native Son.* The feeling which prevailed at the time of its publication was that such a novel, bitter, uncompromising, shocking, gave proof, by its very existence, of what strides might be taken in a free democracy; and its indisputable success, proof that Americans were now

able to look full in the face without flinching the dreadful facts. Americans, unhappily, have the most remarkable ability to alchemize all bitter truths into an innocuous but piquant confection and to transform their moral contradictions, or public discussion of such contradictions, into a proud decoration, such as are given for heroism on the field of battle. Such a book, we felt with pride, could never have been written before—which was true. Nor could it be written today. It bears already the aspect of a landmark; for Bigger and his brothers have undergone yet another metamorphosis; they have been accepted in baseball leagues and by colleges hitherto exclusive; and they have made a most favorable appearance on the national screen. We have yet to encounter, nevertheless, a report so indisputably authentic, or one that can begin to challenge this most significant novel.

It is, in a certain American tradition, the story of an unremarkable youth in battle with the force of circumstance; that force of circumstance which plays and which has played so important a part in the national fables of success or failure. In this case the force of circumstance is not poverty merely but color, a circumstance which cannot be overcome, against which the protagonist battles for his life and loses. It is, on the surface, remarkable that this book should have enjoyed among Americans the favor it did enjoy; no more remarkable, however, than that it should have been compared, exuberantly, to Dostoevsky, though placed a shade below Dos Passos, Dreiser, and Steinbeck; and when the book is examined, its impact does not seem remarkable at all, but becomes, on the contrary, perfectly logical and inevitable.

We cannot, to begin with, divorce this book from the specific social climate of that time: it was one of the last of those angry productions, encountered in the late twenties and all through the thirties, dealing with the inequities of the social structure of America. It was published one year before our entry into the last world war—which is to say, very few years after the dissolution of the WPA and the end of the New Deal and at a time when bread lines and soup kitchens and bloody industrial battles were bright in everyone's memory. The rigors of that unexpected time filled us not only with a genuinely bewildered and despairing idealism—so that, because there at least was *something* to fight for, young men went off to die in Spain—but also with a genuinely

bewildered self-consciousness. The Negro, who had been during the magnificent twenties a passionate and delightful primitive, now became, as one of the things we were most self-conscious about, our most oppressed minority. In the thirties, swallowing Marx whole, we discovered the Worker and realized—I should think with some relief—that the aims of the Worker and the aims of the Negro were one. This theorem—to which we shall return—seems now to leave rather too much out of account; it became, nevertheless, one of the slogans of the "class struggle" and the gospel of the New Negro.

As for this New Negro, it was Wright who became his most eloquent spokesman; and his work, from its beginning, is most clearly committed to the social struggle. Leaving aside the considerable question of what relationship precisely the artist bears to the revolutionary, the reality of man as a social being is not his only reality and that artist is strangled who is forced to deal with human beings solely in social terms; and who has, moreover, as Wright had, the necessity thrust on him of being the representative of some thirteen million people. It is a false responsibility (since writers are not congressmen) and impossible, by its nature, of fulfillment. The unlucky shepherd soon finds that, so far from being able to feed the hungry sheep, he has lost the wherewithal for his own nourishment: having not been allowed—so fearful was his burden, so present his audience!—to recreate his own experience. Further, the militant men and women of the thirties were not, upon examination, significantly emancipated from their antecedents, however bitterly they might consider themselves estranged or however gallantly they struggled to build a better world. However they might extol Russia, their concept of a better world was quite helplessly American and betrayed a certain thinness of imagination, a suspect reliance on suspect and badly digested formulae, and a positively fretful romantic haste. Finally, the relationship of the Negro to the Worker cannot be summed up, nor even greatly illuminated, by saying that their aims are one. It is true only insofar as they both desire better working conditions and useful only insofar as they unite their strength as workers to achieve these ends. Further than this we cannot in honesty go.

In this climate Wright's voice first was heard and the struggle which promised for a time to shape his work and give it purpose also fixed it in

an ever more unrewarding rage. Recording his days of anger he has also nevertheless recorded, as no Negro before him had ever done, that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro: that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash. This is the significance of *Native Son* and also, unhappily, its overwhelming limitation.

Native Son begins with the *Brring!* of an alarm clock in the squalid Chicago tenement where Bigger and his family live. Rats live there too, feeding off the garbage, and we first encounter Bigger in the act of killing one. One may consider that the entire book, from that harsh *Brring!* to Bigger's weak "Good-by" as the lawyer, Max, leaves him in the death cell, is an extension, with the roles inverted, of this chilling metaphor. Bigger's situation and Bigger himself exert on the mind the same sort of fascination. The premise of the book is, as I take it, clearly conveyed in these first pages: we are confronting a monster created by the American republic and we are, through being made to share his experience, to receive illumination as regards the manner of his life and to feel both pity and horror at his awful and inevitable doom. This is an arresting and potentially rich idea and we would be discussing a very different novel if Wright's execution had been more perceptive and if he had not attempted to redeem a symbolical monster in social terms.

One may object that it was precisely Wright's intention to create in Bigger a social symbol, revelatory of social disease and prophetic of disaster. I think, however, that it is this assumption which we ought to examine more carefully. Bigger has no discernible relationship to himself, to his own life, to his own people, nor to any other people—in this respect, perhaps, he is most American—and his force comes, not from his significance as a social (or anti-social) unit, but from his significance as the incarnation of a myth. It is remarkable that, though we follow him step by step from the tenement room to the death cell, we know as little about him when this journey is ended as we did when it began; and, what is even more remarkable, we know almost as little about the social dynamic which we are to believe created him. Despite the details of slum life which we are given, I doubt that anyone who has thought about it, disengaging himself from sentimentality, can accept

this most essential premise of the novel for a moment. Those Negroes who surround him, on the other hand, his hard-working mother, his ambitious sister, his poolroom cronies, Bessie, might be considered as far richer and far more subtle and accurate illustrations of the ways in which Negroes are controlled in our society and the complex techniques they have evolved for their survival. We are limited, however, to Bigger's view of them, part of a deliberate plan which might not have been disastrous if we were not also limited to Bigger's perceptions. What this means for the novel is that a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life. What the novel reflects—and at no point interprets—is the isolation of the Negro within his own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn. It is this which creates its climate of anarchy and unmotivated and unapprehended disaster; and it is this climate, common to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father's house. But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate. For a tradition expresses, after all, nothing more than the long and painful experience of a people; it comes out of the battle waged to maintain their integrity or, to put it more simply, out of their struggle to survive. When we speak of the Jewish tradition we are speaking of centuries of exile and persecution, of the strength which endured and the sensibility which discovered in it the high possibility of the moral victory.

This sense of how Negroes live and how they have so long endured is hidden from us in part by the very speed of the Negro's public progress, a progress so heavy with complexity, so bewildering and kaleidoscopic, that he dare not pause to conjecture on the darkness which lies behind him; and by the nature of the American psychology which, in order to apprehend or be made able to accept it, must undergo a metamorphosis so profound as to be literally unthinkable and which there is no doubt we will resist until we are compelled to achieve our own identity by the

rigors of a time that has yet to come. Bigger, in the meanwhile, and all his furious kin, serve only to whet the notorious national taste for the sensational and to reinforce all that we now find it necessary to believe. It is not Bigger whom we fear, since his appearance among us makes our victory certain. It is the others, who smile, who go to church, who give no cause for complaint, whom we sometimes consider with amusement, with pity, even with affection—and in whose faces we sometimes surprise the merest arrogant hint of hatred, the faintest, withdrawn, speculative shadow of contempt—who make us uneasy; whom we cajole, threaten, flatter, fear; who to us remain unknown, though we are not (we feel with both relief and hostility and with bottomless confusion) unknown to them. It is out of our reaction to these hewers of wood and drawers of water that our image of Bigger was created.

It is this image, living yet, which we perpetually seek to evade with good works; and this image which makes of all our good works an intolerable mockery. The "nigger," black, benighted, brutal, consumed with hatred as we are consumed with guilt, cannot be thus blotted out. He stands at our shoulders when we give our maid her wages, it is his hand which we fear we are taking when struggling to communicate with the current "intelligent" Negro, his stench, as it were, which fills our mouths with salt as the monument is unveiled in honor of the latest Negro leader. Each generation has shouted behind him, *Nigger!* as he walked our streets; it is he whom we would rather our sisters did not marry; he is banished into the vast and wailing outer darkness whenever we speak of the "purity" of our women, of the "sanctity" of our homes, of "American" ideals. What is more, he knows it. He is indeed the "native son": he is the "nigger." Let us refrain from inquiring at the moment whether or not he actually exists; for we *believe* that he exists. Whenever we encounter him amongst us in the flesh, our faith is made perfect and his necessary and bloody end is executed with a mystical ferocity of joy.

But there is a complementary faith among the damned which involves their gathering of the stones with which those who walk in the light shall stone them; or there exists among the intolerably degraded the perverse and powerful desire to force into the arena of the actual those fantastic crimes of which they have been accused, achieving their

vengeance and their own destruction through making the nightmare real. The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro's heart; and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality. Then he, like the white enemy with whom he will be locked one day in mortal struggle, has no means save this of asserting his identity. This is why Bigger's murder of Mary can be referred to as an "act of creation" and why, once this murder has been committed, he can feel for the first time that he is living fully and deeply as a man was meant to live. And there is, I should think, no Negro living in America who has not felt, briefly or for long periods, with anguish sharp or dull, in varying degrees and to varying effect, simple, naked and unanswerable hatred; who has not wanted to smash any white face he may encounter in a day, to violate, out of motives of the cruelest vengeance, their women, to break the bodies of all white people and bring them low, as low as that dust into which he himself has been and is being trampled; no Negro, finally, who has not had to make his own precarious adjustment to the "nigger" who surrounds him and to the "nigger" in himself.

Yet the adjustment must be made—rather, it must be attempted, the tension perpetually sustained—for without this he has surrendered his birthright as a man no less than his birthright as a black man. The entire universe is then peopled only with his enemies, who are not only white men armed with rope and rifle, but his own far-flung and contemptible kinsmen. Their blackness is his degradation and it is their stupid and passive endurance which makes his end inevitable.

Bigger dreams of some black man who will weld all blacks together into a mighty fist, and feels, in relation to his family, that perhaps they had to live as they did precisely because none of them had ever done anything, right or wrong, which mattered very much. It is only he who, by an act of murder, has burst the dungeon cell. He has made it manifest that *he* lives and that his despised blood nourishes the passions of a man. He has forced his oppressors to see the fruit of that oppression: and he feels, when his family and his friends come to visit him in the death cell, that they should not be weeping or frightened, that they should be happy, *proud* that he has dared, through murder and now through his own imminent destruction, to redeem their anger and humiliation, that

he has hurled into the spiritless obscurity of their lives the lamp of his passionate life and death. Henceforth, they may remember Bigger—who has died, as we may conclude, for them. But they do not feel this; they only know that he has murdered two women and precipitated a reign of terror; and that now he is to die in the electric chair. They therefore weep and are honestly frightened—for which Bigger despises them and wishes to "blot" them out. What is missing in his situation and in the representation of his psychology—which makes his situation false and his psychology incapable of development—is any revelatory apprehension of Bigger as one of the Negro's realities or as one of the Negro's roles. This failure is part of the previously noted failure to convey any sense of Negro life as a continuing and complex group reality. Bigger, who cannot function therefore as a reflection of the social illness, having, as it were, no society to reflect, likewise refuses to function on the loftier level of the Christ-symbol. His kinsmen are quite right to weep and be frightened, even to be appalled: for it is not his love for them or for himself which causes him to die, but his hatred and his self-hatred; he does not redeem the pains of a despised people, but reveals, on the contrary, nothing more than his own fierce bitterness at having been born one of them. In this also he is the "native son," his progress determinable by the speed with which the distance increases between himself and the auction-block and all that the auction-block implies. To have penetrated this phenomenon, this inward contention of love and hatred, blackness and whiteness, would have given him a stature more nearly human and an end more nearly tragic; and would have given us a document more profoundly and genuinely bitter and less harsh with an anger which is, on the one hand, exhibited and, on the other hand, denied.

Native Son finds itself at length so trapped by the American image of Negro life and by the American necessity to find the ray of hope that it cannot pursue its own implications. This is why Bigger must be at the last redeemed, to be received, if only by rhetoric, into that community of phantoms which is our tenaciously held ideal of the happy social life. It is the socially conscious whites who receive him—the Negroes being capable of no such objectivity—and we have, by way of illustration, that lamentable scene in which Jan, Mary's lover, forgives him for her

murder; and, carrying the explicit burden of the novel, Max's long speech to the jury. This speech, which really ends the book, is one of the most desperate performances in American fiction. It is the question of Bigger's humanity which is at stake, the relationship in which he stands to all other Americans—and, by implication, to all people—and it is precisely this question which it cannot clarify, with which it cannot, in fact, come to any coherent terms. He is the monster created by the American republic, the present awful sum of generations of oppression; but to say that he is a monster is to fall into the trap of making him subhuman and he must, therefore, be made representative of a way of life which is real and human in precise ratio to the degree to which it seems to us monstrous and strange. It seems to me that this idea carries, implicitly, a most remarkable confession: that is, that Negro life is in fact as debased and impoverished as our theology claims; and, further, that the use to which Wright puts this idea can only proceed from the assumption—not entirely unsound—that Americans, who evade, so far as possible, all genuine experience, have therefore no way of assessing the experience of others and no way of establishing themselves in relation to any way of life which is not their own. The privacy or obscurity of Negro life makes that life capable, in our imaginations, of producing anything at all; and thus the idea of Bigger's monstrosity can be presented without fear of contradiction, since no American has the knowledge or authority to contest it and no Negro has the voice. It is an idea, which, in the framework of the novel, is dignified by the possibility it promptly affords of presenting Bigger as the herald of disaster, the danger signal of a more bitter time to come when not Bigger alone but all his kindred will rise, in the name of the many thousands who have perished in fire and flood and by rope and torture, to demand their rightful vengeance.

But it is not quite fair, it seems to me, to exploit the national innocence in this way. The idea of Bigger as a warning boomerangs not only because it is quite beyond the limit of probability that Negroes in America will ever achieve the means of wreaking vengeance upon the state but also because it cannot be said that they have any desire to do so. *Native Son* does not convey the altogether savage paradox of the American Negro's situation, of which the social reality which we prefer

with such hopeful superficiality to study is but, as it were, the shadow. It is not simply the relationship of oppressed to oppressor, of master to slave, nor is it motivated merely by hatred; it is also, literally and morally, a *blood* relationship, perhaps the most profound reality of the American experience, and we cannot begin to unlock it until we accept how very much it contains of the force and anguish and terror of love.

Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny. They have no other experience besides their experience on this continent and it is an experience which cannot be rejected, which yet remains to be embraced. If, as I believe, no American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull, then what most significantly fails to be illuminated here is the paradoxical adjustment which is perpetually made, the Negro being compelled to accept the fact that this dark and dangerous and unloved stranger is part of himself forever. Only this recognition sets him in any wise free and it is this, this necessary ability to contain and even, in the most honorable sense of the word, to *exploit* the "nigger," which lends to Negro life its high element of the ironic and which causes the most well-meaning of their American critics to make such exhilarating errors when attempting to understand them. To present Bigger as a warning is simply to reinforce the American guilt and fear concerning him, it is most forcefully to limit him to that previously mentioned social arena in which he has no human validity, it is simply to condemn him to death. For he has always been a warning, he represents the evil, the sin and suffering which we are compelled to reject. It is useless to say to the courtroom in which this heathen sits on trial that he is their responsibility, their creation, and his crimes are theirs; and that they ought, therefore, to allow him to live, to make articulate to himself behind the walls of prison the meaning of his existence. The meaning of his existence has already been most adequately expressed, nor does anyone wish, particularly not in the name of democracy, to think of it any more; as for the possibility of articulation, it is this possibility which above all others we most dread. Moreover, the courtroom, judge, jury, witnesses and spectators, recognize immediately that Bigger is their creation and they recognize this not only with hatred and fear and guilt and the resulting fury of self-righteousness but also with that morbid fullness of pride mixed with

horror with which one regards the extent and power of one's wickedness. They know that death is his portion, that he runs to death; coming from darkness and dwelling in darkness, he must be, as often as he rises, banished, lest the entire planet be engulfed. And they know, finally, that they do not wish to forgive him and that he does not wish to be forgiven; that he dies, hating them, scorning that appeal which they cannot make to that irrecoverable humanity of his which cannot hear it; and that he *wants* to die because he glories in his hatred and prefers, like Lucifer, rather to rule in hell than serve in heaven.

For, bearing in mind the premise on which the life of such a man is based, *i.e.,* that black is the color of damnation, this is his only possible end. It is the only death which will allow him a kind of dignity or even, however horribly, a kind of beauty. To tell this story, no more than a single aspect of the story of the "nigger," is inevitably and richly to become involved with the force of life and legend, how each perpetually assumes the guise of the other, creating that dense, many-sided and shifting reality which is the world we live in and the world we make. To tell his story is to begin to liberate us from his image and it is, for the first time, to clothe this phantom with flesh and blood, to deepen, by our understanding of him and his relationship to us, our understanding of ourselves and of all men.

But this is not the story which *Native Son* tells, for we find here merely, repeated in anger, the story which we have told in pride. Nor, since the implications of this anger are evaded, are we ever confronted with the actual or potential significance of our pride; which is why we fall, with such a positive glow of recognition, upon Max's long and bitter summing up. It is addressed to those among us of good will and it seems to say that, though there are whites and blacks among us who hate each other, we will not; there are those who are betrayed by greed, by guilt, by blood lust, but not we; we will set our faces against them and join hands and walk together into that dazzling future when there will be no white or black. This is the dream of all liberal men, a dream not at all dishonorable, but, nevertheless, a dream. For, let us join hands on this mountain as we may, the battle is elsewhere. It proceeds far from us in the heat and horror and pain of life itself where all men are betrayed by greed and guilt and bloodlust and where no one's hands are clean. Our

good will, from which we yet expect such power to transform us, is thin, passionless, strident: its roots, examined, lead us back to our forebears, whose assumption it was that the black man, to become truly human and acceptable, must first become like us. This assumption once accepted, the Negro in America can only acquiesce in the obliteration of his own personality, the distortion and debasement of his own experience, surrendering to those forces which reduce the person to anonymity and which make themselves manifest daily all over the darkening world.

MANY THOUSANDS GONE

I. Course Hero:

A. Summary

- Baldwin claims that African Americans have been able to tell their story through the medium of music. The story of African Americans is the story of America, and it is not a pretty one. The problem white America has with African Americans stems from how whites view the problem as a social rather than a personal or human problem, rooted in notions of statistics, ghettoes, and violence. When African Americans defy their stereotype, white Americans feel a sense of panic and betrayal. When this image is violated, African Americans can find themselves in danger. According to Baldwin, to truly know what it means to be African American in America, the racial myths and stereotypes that are perpetuated must be examined. While whites may think they understood African Americans through the caricature of characters such as Aunt Jemima or Uncle Tom, the reverse truth is more likely that African Americans understood whites. To become an American one must "reject all other ties" and history and adopt the customs and habits of America. Yet in the case of the African American, Baldwin believes his history was taken from him whether he wanted to become American or not, so this chance is denied him. He was then forced to accept the image America gave him of himself—as a slave.
- Baldwin points to the novel Native Son by Richard Wright as a turning point in the way literature portrays what it means to be African American in America. However, Baldwin also warns that what makes it unprecedented is ultimately what marks its limitations. The main character, Bigger, has no real relationship to himself, his life, or his people, which Wright intended to point out was a byproduct of how society treats, controls, and teaches African Americans. If anything, Baldwin hints, it is the other characters in the novel that illustrate the "complex techniques" African Americans have evolved to survive—work and ambition. But since Native Son is told from Bigger's perspective, it is limited in its portrayal of relationships between African Americans: "That depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life."
- Despite any alleged progress in society about the way African Americans are treated, deep racial prejudice still clearly exists for Baldwin, and African Americans are painfully aware of it. Baldwin believes this ongoing sense of despair and realization means that all African Americans have at some point or other felt hatred for whites, wishing that they could know what it feels like to be brought so low, as has been done to them. Not only that, but it turns other African Americans into enemies as well for acting as a constant reminder of their degradation and "passive endurance." Baldwin finds that Wright's ultimate message is that Americans have "no way of establishing themselves in relation to any way of life which is not their own." And yet, African Americans are Americans, and "their destiny is the country's destiny," although their experience as Americans has never been embraced. However, they must acknowledge that they all have a "Bigger" character within them, "dark and dangerous and unloved." American society must also face the fact that it has created a character like Bigger, even if it means facing fear and guilt. For it seems that white American society will only deem African Americans as human and acceptable if they become like them.

B. Analysis:

- Baldwin continues his criticism and inquiry into the nature and cultural effect of African American literature, music, and film. Although he finds literature and film complicated and lacking in their honest portrayal of the lives and struggles of African Americans, he believes

"it is only in his music" that "the Negro in America has been able to tell his story." The fact that Baldwin believes no American is prepared to hear this story implies there are too many uncomfortable truths in it for white Americans. By not being able to discuss uncomfortable facts and racist histories, oppression persists. American society will remain fragmented, separate, and discordant until this reality is confronted. Baldwin also believes that white Americans make the deliberate mistake of believing that race "is a social and not a personal or a human problem." This allows them to continue not to recognize the humanity or identity of African Americans, and keeps African Americans confined to the "trap" set for them. Again, Baldwin emphasizes a strong message: "Our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves." What affects one will inevitably affect all through the fabric of society.

- Baldwin believes it is essential to examine the myths and stereotypes that are perpetuated about African Americans in order to understand what it means to be an African American. In these images exist the past that America denies, that claims to be dead but is still alive and thriving. Baldwin is also curious about the question of what it means to be made an American, and ascertains that it "begins at that point where he himself rejects all other ties, any other history." African Americans, however, aren't given the option of rejecting their history, as it is taken from them against their will through the history of slavery.
- Baldwin turns his attention back to what African American literature can reveal about their experience. A criticism he holds against Richard Wright's Native Son is that it doesn't examine the relationship African Americans have with one another, "that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life." It is in these relationships that African American identities are revealed, because there is an implicit kinship and understanding of the conflict and tension within the identity. Baldwin once again emphasizes that "Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny." Americans can never truly know themselves and their future until they accept how intertwined the history of African Americans is with the fate of all Americans.

II. Litchart:

Summary

Baldwin argues that black people have been unable to tell their story to “the white majority,” who have been unwilling and unable to listen. Yet in reality, the story of African Americans is the story of America itself. White people have developed particular ways of thinking about black people, through statistics, categories, and simplistic moral positions such as righteousness or outrage. These ways of thinking have very little to do with the reality of black life, yet when black people contradict white peoples’ ideas they risk “immediate retaliation.” Prevailing ideas about black people have changed over time, but these ideas have always been a product of guilt rather than a reflection of reality. Today, false science and negative stereotypes about black people have been disproven, yet society is still strictly segregated along racial lines.

Analysis

In this passage Baldwin argues that it is not only hateful and hostile thinking that inhibits racial progress; it is also seemingly neutral or positive ways of thinking, such as scientific analysis or indignation at racial inequality. The problem with these forms of thought is not that they intend to oppress black people, but that they are dishonest. Baldwin argues that every false idea about black people is harmful, and that almost all ideas about black people circulated within white society are false.

The racist stereotypes of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom may have disappeared, yet we must understand them in order to understand what it means to be black in America. While both are theoretically positive figures beloved by white people, negative ideas about black people are in fact threaded into their supposedly positive attributes. Moreover, the intimacy of the master-slave (or master-servant) relationship creates a well-founded suspicion that black people understand white people better than white people understand themselves. This causes tension between the races that persists in the present. Baldwin concludes that "it is a sentimental error… to believe that the past is dead."

The end of this passage contains a subtle but crucially important point. Baldwin suggests that white people hate and fear black people precisely because of the intimacy between them. The two races have coexisted in America for centuries, and the social structure of servitude has meant that black people have developed an extensive knowledge of whites. This puts the races on an uneven playing field, as white people do not understand black people to nearly the same extent.

Baldwin argues that people become American when they cut off ties to other cultures, histories, and identities, and that this happened to African Americans by force. Black people were given no choice but to accept the image of themselves invented by white society. Richard Wright's Native Son is "the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America," and people tend to believe that its publication alone is proof of racial progress. The novel falls into an American tradition of depicting a young person struggling against his circumstances. While it may at first seem surprising that the novel was so popular and successful, in fact it is not surprising at all. The book is a product of the 1930s, a time of righteous anger at social inequality and injustice. Wright became the "spokesman" of "the New Negro" and was doomed by this task, as it is not possible for one person to represent 13 million others. This burden prevented Wright from accurately depicting his own experience. Instead, he replicated the false vision of black people held by most Americans.

At first glance, Baldwin's critique of "Native Son" closely resembles his critique of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." However, there is a crucial difference between the two novels; whereas "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was published in 1852 and was written by a white woman, "Native Son" was published in 1940 and was written by a black man. We might therefore expect there to be a vast difference between the two authors' approach to racial equality. However, Baldwin contends that this is not in fact the case. Although Wright is black, he has internalized the same racist ideology that prevents "Uncle Tom's Cabin" from being a truly progressive novel. Wright's experience as a black man, while significant, does not overcome the prevailing power of racist ideas.

Baldwin feels that Wright's aim was to depict a "monster" created by America, and that this would have been an interesting goal if Wright had not attempted to redeem this monster "in social terms." The reader learns very little about Bigger over the course of the novel; although the other black characters are more three-dimensional, Wright gives no sense of Bigger's relationship to them. This creates the impression that black people are isolated from one another and that they have no traditions,

As Baldwin explains, racist oppression creates "monstrosity" in two ways. The first of these is material; due to centuries of impoverishment, injustice, and persecution, black people at times find themselves in desperate situations that can lead them to acts of violence. The other form of oppression that leads to monstrosity is psychological. Black people are bombarded with negative stereotypes about their race, symbolized by the figure of the "nigger." Baldwin argues that black people internalize this

customs, or social intercourse of their own. Within the American psyche, the reality of black life is obscured and incomprehensible. When white people interact with the polite and good-natured black people around them, they are haunted by the figure of the “nigger,” who represents all the negativity associated with blackness. Baldwin proposes that every black person has, at some point or other, felt a desire to seek violent vengeance against whites and in doing so live up to the image of the “nigger,” which they have been taught to believe represents themselves.

figure and measure their actions against it, even sometimes wishing to succumb to it as if it were true. Of course, in reality this figure is nothing more than a racist myth; yet when given enough power, myths can have a strong impact on reality.

III. GradeSaver

A. Summary:

- This essay begins with the question of where black people can tell their stories. Baldwin argues that stories are sometimes like “hieroglyphics” hidden in songs and everyday speech. It can be hard to express the realities of black life in America and for white people to receive these stories. Yet these realities are essential to understanding the country. Baldwin writes: “The story of the Negro in America is the story of America—or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans.” This is not a happy story, however. The realities known by black people exist like a “shadow” over American life—and they have a “shadowy” existence, living more in our minds than in reality.
- For this reason, Americans often prefer to treat the black person as a social problem; "to think of him is to think of statistics, slums, rapes, injustices, remote violence." The moment the story goes beyond either sociology or (as Baldwin also writes in “Everybody’s Protest Novel”) sentimentality, people panic. This avoidance of the truth has dire consequences for America because if black people are dehumanized, then all are dehumanized. Baldwin suggests that those who take someone else’s identity away also lose their own in the process. To avoid this truth, white Americans seek to change the black face—if it cannot be white then it should at least be blank. This is done to escape deep, ingrained guilt.
- Baldwin argues that the best way to understand the reality of being black in America is through looking at popular myths. The first of these is Aunt Jemima, based on the “Mammy”: an archetype of a heavy black woman who serves her masters submissively. Aunt Jemima was a popular stage character starting in the 1860s and continued to be portrayed in minstrel performances in the 1920s. The other popular myth is Uncle Tom, from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin. According to Baldwin, Aunt Jemima is presented as pious and loyal, but she is also weak and vicious. Similarly, Uncle Tom is shown to be dependable and sexless, but there is violence and craftiness hidden within him. When Baldwin wrote this essay in 1951, these stereotypes were already old, but they continued to have power: "In our image of the Negro breathes the past we deny." The power of these myths can be seen in the fact that even in enlightened, progressive environments like an “interracial cocktail party,” Baldwin writes, the presence of a black face still creates tension. The unspeakable past, in which black people were enslaved and taken from their homes, haunts the present.
- It is due to this tension that white America seeks to do social analysis regarding race. Looking at facts and figures is comforting because it shows how much “progress” has been made. Yet there remains an uneasiness, one which Baldwin argues can be seen best in

"problem" literature, written by white people, and "protest" literature, written by black people. Despite the different approaches in these two literary genres dealing with race, both begin with the same presupposition: "black is a terrible color with which to be born into the world."

- Baldwin again gives the example of Richard Wright's Native Son as protest literature. When the book came out in 1940, it was seen as a powerful attempt to show the realities of being black in America. Many took the book as proof that American democracy was working. Yet Baldwin is critical of the book and argues that it is not so bold as it at first seemed. He connects the book to the America of the 1920s and 1930s, when there was a strong left-wing movement in the country and the concept of social inequality became an important category for understanding society. This was a period when many felt sympathy with the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, began reading Marx, and argued that the "Worker" and the "Negro" had common interests. Yet Baldwin suggests that this period was overly idealistic and used simple formulas to understand a much-more-complex world.
- In Native Son, Baldwin sees revealed the problems with a purely sociological approach to race, particularly within literature: "the reality of man as a social being is not his only reality and that artist is strangled who is forced to deal with human beings only on social terms." In the novel, Wright told the story of Bigger Thomas. He showed his social context growing up in a Chicago tenement with rats all over. His conditions of life lead him to commit murder and he eventually ends up being executed. What Wright attempts to show, according to Baldwin, is a "monster created by the American republic."
- Baldwin finds weaknesses in Wright's approach. One problem is that the novel tells us very little about Bigger Thomas' relationship to his community. The question of how black people live together and relate to one another is left out. Instead, there is a fantasy of black life with no shared traditions, interactions, rituals. Yet as Baldwin suggested at the beginning of the essay, this tradition is there but it is often hard to express or see. Few writers have been able to express it. Yet oppressed communities build a tradition out of methods of surviving a painful history. Baldwin gives the example of Jewish people to illustrate this.
- It is also difficult to see this cultural tradition because of social progress. Even the educated, upwardly mobile, upstanding black people scare white America and remain partly invisible. Bigger, in contrast, is a character meant to shock. Yet this image of what it means to be black already exists hidden in people's hearts. The problem with this character, for Baldwin, is that he offers a means of surrendering to this image of violence, implying that the races can only exist in never-ending conflict and that violence is the only way of asserting identity. This is why Native Son has Bigger murder Mary, a white woman. This becomes an "act of creation" in the novel. Baldwin suggests that this impulse may enter the hearts of all black people in America at times. It is a desire for revenge, to get even through showing others the same treatment they have received. This is understandable because this is a monstrousness created by the conditions in America. Yet to confess this in a novel, as Wright does, is to make a dangerous confession "that Negro life is in fact as debased and impoverished as our theology claims." What the novel should explore instead, Baldwin asserts, is not the fact that black Americans have a Bigger Thomas inside of them but how it is that they adjust to this reality, accept this part hidden inside of them, and carry on living.
- Baldwin ends the essay by critiquing the idea that we can simply forget and move beyond race. He describes the character Jan, Mary's lover, in Native Son and the way he forgives Bigger and gives a speech to the jury urging them to understand why he did what he did. Baldwin does not think we can go beyond hatred this easily, though this is the "dream of all liberal men." This view is based on a simplistic idea of goodwill and assumes that the black

man will become just like “us.” This is a myth and stereotype as damaging as the other ones Baldwin discusses in this essay. It will result in the “obliteration of his own personality, the distortion and debasement of his own experience.” The real task is to explore and express the reality of this experience, not run from it.

B. Analysis:

- The title of this essay comes from the African American folk song “No More Auction Block,” which describes the thousands sold and killed in the Atlantic slave trade. A central theme of the essay is that the history of slavery and its legacy of unfreedom is at the heart of American life and that the past cannot be separated from the present. It is essential to grapple with the “shadow” of history because race cannot simply be transcended and forgotten. As Baldwin writes, “Negroes are Americans and their destiny is the country's destiny.”
- Yet attempts to understand black people, their cultural traditions, and ways of surviving are often shallow or unsatisfying. As in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” here Baldwin again gives the negative example of African-American novelist Richard Wright’s Native Son. By dealing with this influential novel by a former friend of his, Baldwin is putting his own ideas forward about literature and race. Being committed to a “cause” does not necessarily mean one will write a good novel. Presenting characters through a merely sociological lens is not enough to get at the root of when makes them human, an essential function of literature for Baldwin. It is also not enough to get at the reality of race in America. Making Bigger Thomas a symbol of the oppressive and potentially explosive conditions in which black people live does not do justice the complex reality. A novel should be able to show racial oppression while also not confirming stereotypes. The important thing is to reveal the complexity and contradictions of black experience.
- Despite Baldwin’s strong arguments about race and literature, one oft-remarked aspect of this essay is its strange use of the pronoun “we.” At moments the essay appears to be written from a white perspective, with the speaker aligning himself with white people while describing aspects of black life from a cold, clinical distance. In this sense, “we” and “the Negro” are separated. Yet at other moments, the essay is written from a black perspective with “we” encompassing the writer and his community. In the 1960s, Baldwin was criticized by activists in the black nationalist and Black Power movements for sometimes adopting a white voice in his writings. Yet some scholars have argued that this technique is effective in actually revealing the strength of the racial divide in America.