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EXPOS-UA

Writing the Essay

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Texts/Contexts: Exercise 6

In Baldwin’s essays, “Stranger in the Village,” certain words and concepts such as the use of the N-word and rage were extensively apparent when reading his work. In “Stranger in the Village,” Baldwin paints a scene where little children shout out “neger” when seeing him in their little European Village. This specific scene had a profound effect in me, the juxtaposition of innocence children using such a hateful word, was quite shocking not only to me but to Baldwin as well.  *" It must be admitted that in the beginning I was far too shocked to have any real reaction ",* ( Baldwin 94). I liken this effect to a similar scene to Gabrielle Bell’s comic “How I Make My Comics,” where Bell writes deep thought provoking ideas, switching from a deep, morose atmosphere to thinking she’s not good enough then a quick, sharp mood change to happy when finishing up writing her comics. This quick change of mood elicited a comedic response to readers with a quick clash of emotions in the last slide of her comic, however for Baldwin’s case , this wasn’t comedic. Baldwin’s feeling of shock and rage are completely valid; he was made to feel inferior since as long as he can remember, this something not easily dismissible. Baldwin goes onto explain the history of the American Negro, and how the n-word was derived to divide a nation, *“…Became one of those used to divide the nation. It is out of this argument that the venom of the epithet: Nigger! is derived.”,(*Baldwin 5).

America’s brutal tactics and racist past, spread world wide and influenced small villages, like the Swiss Village Baldwin is visiting. Baldwin feels like a stranger in this specific village, in his first visit to the Swiss village, people look at him with shock and contempt when viewing a black man for the first time in their home. His second visit was much better than the first, people acknowledge him and have conversations with him, but a tension still exists between Baldwin and the people in the village, *" But some of the men have accused le sale ne'gre - behind my back- of stealing wood and there is already in the eyes of some of them that peculiar, intent, paranoic malevolence which one sometimes surprises in the air of American white men when, out walking with their Sunday girl, they see a negro male approach ",* (Baldwin 97) . The n-word, with Baldwin’s explanation in the essay, was created by white Americans who saw African Americans as second class citizens, not acknowledging them as any equivalence to themselves since *“…It was impossible for Americans to accept the black man as one of themselves, for to do so was to jeopardize their status as white men.”,* (Baldwin 5).

Another apparent concept I saw through Baldwin’s work is his mood of rage and anger. In “Stranger in the Village,” Baldwin states how is rage is fruitless but absolutely inevitable from the racism he has faced not only by the Swiss Village but by the White Americans back home for him. Baldwin is understandably outraged by the way the villagers treat him, his anger being justifiable. No one should be treated as an outsider despite how the past was laced with racial tension and segregation.

Baldwin goes on to explain rage, or specifically his rage, cannot be hidden but disassembled, but it can only be dissembled so much before it strengthens and becomes stronger*,”…Rage cannot be hidden, it can only be dissembled. This dissembling deludes the thoughtless, and strengthens rage and adds, to rage, contempt.”,* (Baldwin 5). This rage can also been in Baldwin’s other essay, “Everybody’s Protest Novel.”

In the essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin does not hide his disdain for Harriet Stowe’s novel “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” Arguably, Stowe’s novel was a propaganda literature that promoted anti-slavery. Many critics deemed Stowe’s novel in paving the groundwork for the Civil War. Baldwin condemns the novel as a “…very bad novel, having, in its self-righteous, virtuous sentimentality, much in common with Little Women.” (Baldwin 2). Baldwin is very cynical of Stowe’s attempt in aiding the help of slaves, questioning whether or not the intent of the novel was to actually help liberate the African Americans from slavery or was it more of a self-serving action, *“The virtuous rage of Mrs. Stowe is motivated by nothing so temporal as a concern for the relationship of men to one another-or, even, as she would have claimed, by a concern for their relationship to God- but merely by a panic of being hurled in to flames, of being caught in traffic with the devil.”* (Baldwin 17) . Baldwin explains the purpose of the novel undercut the true horrors and violence, over simplifying it as well being overtly sentimental. Here, in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” Baldwin’s rage is highlighted by his biting critique of Stowe’s Novel, he provides his own assessment of her novel, specifying the novel as overtly sentimental, simplifying the plight of the slaves, and overall self-serving rather than helping.

Both essay’s showed similar content with one another, the abundant use of the n-word, and Baldwin’s tone of rage. Most of Baldwin’s work had a common theme of racial tension, and segregation, each essay also always involved a small, brief lesson of history and the horrors of being an African American of his time. Baldwin writes his inner ideas and thoughts, showcasing dark times, and racism present back in Baldwin’s days.

MLA Citation