

American Literature Readings 6



A Time of Upheaval

INTRODUCTION

Every period of American history has been filled with change. The years between 1954 and 1980 were no exception. After World War II, the nation struggled to put its social and political ideals into practice while fighting new military wars overseas and social battles at home. The civil rights movement, the women's movement, the Vietnam War, and student unrest were only some of the highlights of this era.

from "Down at the Cross—Letter From a Region in My Mind"

James Baldwin

✦ **About the Selection** James Baldwin (1924–1987) was one of the nation's most important and prolific African American writers, with works spanning 40 years and including short stories, a children's book, novels, essays, and plays. Baldwin was born in poverty, grew up under the eye of a violent stepfather, and left home at 17. In 1948 he left the United States for Paris and London where he wrote his first important work, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. His writings include vivid and painful portrayals of racism in America.

GUIDED READING

As you read, identify the emotions you feel and analyze how Baldwin brings them to the surface. Then answer the questions that follow.

The treatment accorded the Negro during the Second World War marks, for me, a turning point in the Negro's relation to America. To put it briefly, and somewhat too simply, a certain hope died, a certain respect for white Americans faded. One began to pity them, or to hate them. You must put yourself in the skin of a man who is wearing the uniform of his country, is a candidate for death in his defense, and who is called a "nigger" by his comrades-in-arms and his officers; who is almost always given the hardest, ugliest, most menial work to do; who knows that the white G.I. has informed the Europeans that he is subhuman (so much for the American male's sexual security); who does not dance at the U.S.O. the night white soldiers dance

there, and does not drink in the same bars white soldiers drink in; and who watches German prisoners of war being treated by Americans with more human dignity than he has ever received at their hands. And who, at the same time, as a human being, is far freer in a strange land than he has ever been at home. *Home!* The very word begins to have a despairing and diabolical ring. You must consider what happens to this citizen, after all he has endured, when he returns—home: search, in his shoes, for a job, for a place to live; ride, in his skin, on segregated buses; see, with his eyes, the signs saying "White" and "Colored," and especially the signs that say "White Ladies" and "Colored Women"; look into the eyes of his wife; look into the eyes of

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his son; listen, with his ears, to political speeches, North and South; imagine yourself being told to "wait." And all this is happening in the richest and freest country in the world, and in the middle of the twentieth century. The subtle and deadly change of heart that might occur in you would be involved with

the realization that a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked but only that they be spineless.

From "Down at the Cross—Letter From a Region in My Mind" by James Baldwin. Reprinted by permission of the James Baldwin Estate.

READER RESPONSE

Directions: Answer the following questions on the lines below.

1. How is the treatment of the African American soldier different in the Army and in foreign countries?

2. Why did Baldwin's respect for white Americans diminish during World War II?

3. Explain the difference between "White Ladies" and "Colored Women."

4. **CRITICAL THINKING** Explain what Baldwin means when he says, "a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked, but only that they be spineless."
