

James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son"

MULTIPLE CHOICE

James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

This excerpt is taken from "Notes of a Native Son" by James Baldwin. 1
Born in Harlem in 1924, a preacher and a published writer of reviews and essays at 2
a young age, James Baldwin became a noted writer of American prose. Though he lived 3
abroad for much of his adult life, in Paris, Switzerland, and Istanbul, Baldwin wrote 4
incisively and passionately about the experience of being black in America. 5
"Notes of a Native Son" considers the hatred at the heart of race relations in mid- 6
century America and at the heart of Baldwin's relationship with his father. That Baldwin 7
accepts that hate as neither the totality nor the final destination of these relationships is 8
testament to his sensibility and strength as a writer and as a man. 9

I had not known my father very well. We had got on badly, partly because we 10
shared, in our different fashions, the vice of stubborn pride. When he was dead I real- 11
ized that I had hardly ever spoken to him. When he had been dead a long time I began 12
to wish I had. It seems to be typical of life in America, where opportunities, real and 13
fancied, are thicker than anywhere else on the globe, that the second generation has 14
no time to talk to the first. No one, including my father, seems to have known exactly 15
how old he was, but his mother had been born during slavery. He was of the first 16
generation of free men. He, along with thousands of other Negroes, came North after 17
1919 and I was part of that generation which had never seen the landscape of what 18
Negroes sometimes call the Old Country. 19

He had been born in New Orleans and had been a quite young man there during 20
the time that Louis Armstrong, a boy, was running errands for the dives and honky- 21
tonks of what was always presented to me as one of the most wicked of cities — to this 22
day, whenever I think of New Orleans, I also helplessly think of Sodom and Gomor- 23
rah. My father never mentioned Louis Armstrong, except to forbid us to play his rec- 24
ords; but there was a picture of him on our wall for a long time. One of my father's 25
strong-willed female relatives had placed it there and forbade my father to take it 26
down. He never did, but he eventually maneuvered her out of the house and when, 27
some years later, she was in trouble and near death, he refused to do anything to 28
help her. 29

He was, I think, very handsome. I gather this from photographs and from my 30
own memories of him, dressed in his Sunday best and on his way to preach a ser- 31
mon somewhere, when I was little. Handsome, proud, and ingrown, "like a toe-nail," 32
somebody said. But he looked to me, as I grew older, like pictures I had seen of Afri- 33
can tribal chieftains: he really should have been naked, with war-paint on and bar- 34
baric mementos, standing among spears. He could be chilling in the pulpit and 35
indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have 36
ever met; yet it must be said that there was something else in him, buried in him, 37
which lent him his tremendous power and, even, a rather crushing charm. It had 38
something to do with his blackness, I think — he was very black — with his blackness 39
and his beauty, and with the fact that he knew that he was black but did not know that 40
he was beautiful. He claimed to be proud of his blackness but it had also been the 41
cause of much humiliation and it had fixed bleak boundaries to his life. He was not a 42
young man when we were growing up and he had already suffered many kinds of 43
ruin; in his outrageously demanding and protective way he loved his children, who 44
were black like him and menaced, like him; and all these things sometimes showed in 45
his face when he tried, never to my knowledge with any success, to establish contact 46
with any of us. When he took one of his children on his knee to play, the child always 47
became fretful and began to cry; when he tried to help one of us with our homework 48
the absolutely unabating tension which emanated from him caused our minds and 49
our tongues to become paralyzed, so that he, scarcely knowing why, flew into a rage 50
and the child, not knowing why, was punished. If it ever entered his head to bring a 51

surprise home for his children, it was, almost unfailingly, the wrong surprise and even the big watermelons he often brought home on his back in the summertime led to the most appalling scenes. I do not remember, in all those years, that one of his children was ever glad to see him come home. From what I was able to gather of his early life, it seemed that this inability to establish contact with other people had always marked him and had been one of the things which had driven him out of New Orleans. There was something in him, therefore, groping and tentative, which was never expressed and which was buried with him. One saw it most clearly when he was facing new people and hoping to impress them. But he never did, not for long. We went from church to smaller and more improbable church, he found himself in less and less demand as a minister, and by the time he died none of his friends had come to see him for a long time. He had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit and it frightened me, as we drove him to the graveyard through those unquiet, ruined streets, to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realize that this bitterness now was mine.

1. The organizational pattern of the first two paragraphs (lines 10-29) can best be described as
 - a. description plus argument
 - b. definition
 - c. cause and effect
 - d. narration
 - e. comparison and contrast

2. The word “emanated” in line 49 most likely means
 - a. exuded
 - b. seized
 - c. delivered
 - d. obtained
 - e. sprang

3. Paragraph 1 (lines 10-19) utilizes which of the following rhetorical devices?
 - I. anecdote
 - II. analogy
 - III. epigraph
 - a. I only
 - b. I and II only
 - c. III only
 - d. II and III only
 - e. I, II, and III

4. What is the author’s purpose in lines 55–63 of the excerpt?
 - a. to plead for more understanding of the hardships his father experienced
 - b. to provide an example of how his father changed during the author’s childhood
 - c. to contrast his recollections of his father with that of others
 - d. to analyze the impact that his memories have on his father’s legacy
 - e. to criticize his father’s interactions with people through personal details

5. The author’s use of the first and third person in the sentence beginning “He, along with thousands” (lines 17–19) serves to
 - a. demonstrate his knowledge of historical trends in the early twentieth century
 - b. draw a personal connection to objective information
 - c. shift from a formal tone to a conversational tone
 - d. support his argument through specific and personal details

- e. none of the above
6. It can be inferred from Baldwin's language in paragraph 2 (lines 20–29) that
- a. he found ironic humor in his relationship with his father
 - b. he held minimal admiration for his father's decisions
 - c. his father rejected attending to the needs of his family
 - d. his father's musical tastes influenced his relationships
 - e. all of the above
7. The rhetorical pattern of paragraph 3 (lines 30–66) takes the reader from
- a. detailed information to qualification to specific application
 - b. personal reflection to reconsideration to self-discovery
 - c. abstract point to general idea to qualified opinion
 - d. general argument to specific opinion to detailed fact
 - e. personal experience to rebuttal to specific argument
8. In the sentence beginning "It had something to do with" (lines 38–41), the word "it" refers to his father's
- a. religious commitments
 - b. speaking skills
 - c. resentment
 - d. historical perspective
 - e. none of the above
9. What is the best way to describe the author's attitude in this excerpt?
- a. humorous
 - b. attacking
 - c. disinterested
 - d. optimistic
 - e. contemplative