Going to Meet the Man

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES BALDWIN

Baldwin was born in 1924 in the New York neighborhood of Harlem. He was raised by his mother and step-father, a Baptist minister who abused and ridiculed him. This abuse, as well as the persistent racism Baldwin experienced while growing up, had a deep influence on his writing. At 19, Baldwin began devoting himself seriously to writing, publishing essays and short stories. In 1948, after being denied service in a New York City restaurant because he was Black, Baldwin moved to France, where he wrote some of his most famous works, including *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Notes of a Native Son*. Though Baldwin returned to the U.S. in the 1960s to participate in and document the Civil Rights Movement, he moved back to France later in his life, citing its importance in giving him perspective on his experience of racism in America. Though Baldwin is best known as a novelist and essayist, he was also a playwright, a poet, a critic, and a writer of short stories (such as "Going to Meet the Man"). Though Baldwin never publicly came out as queer, he was romantically linked to both women and men throughout his life and became known for his frank treatment of taboo subjects like homosexuality and bisexuality. Widely considered to be one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century, Baldwin's influence lives on in writers like Toni Morrison and Joan Didion. He died in 1987 of stomach cancer at his home in the south of France.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Going to Meet the Man" was published in 1965, near the end of the Civil Rights Movement, when Black protestors were starting to see the fruits of their labor, such as the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Despite the gains of the movement—or, perhaps, because of them—anti-Black racism continued to plague the U.S. throughout the 1960s, particularly in the South. Baldwin's description in the story of protestors being beaten nearly to death by white police officers was likely inspired by the police violence he witnessed while engaged in civil disobedience during a 1963 tour of the South. Baldwin also has his narrator mention bombings taking place in town, a likely reference to the series of racially motivated bombings in the South in the early 1960s, such as the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four Black children while they were at church. Some also speculate that the brutal lynching described near the end of "Going to Meet the Man" is based on the actual lynching of Jesse Washington, a Black man who was burned, castrated, and killed in Texas in 1916.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though 20th Century African-American Literature dealt with diverse themes, many of Baldwin's contemporaries were also writing about anti-Black racism and police brutality. For example, Richard Wright—a friend of Baldwin's—meditated on the unjust policing and persecution of Black men in his 1940 novel *Native Son*. Toni Morrison, also a friend of Baldwin's, focused more on the intersections of racism and violence against women and credited Baldwin as a primary influence on her work (including novels like *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*). Others of Baldwin's contemporaries documented the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements via memoir, such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, published one year before "Going to Meet the Man." While most of Baldwin's work centered on Black narrators, his 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room*, like "Going to Meet the Man," was narrated by a white man. Unlike "Going to Meet the Man," this particular novel looked at the violence of homophobia rather than racial oppression.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Going to Meet the Man
- **When Written:** Early 1960s
- **Where Written:** While traveling through the American South
- **When Published:** 1963-1965
- **Literary Period:** 20th Century African-American Literature
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** A small town in the American South
- **Climax:** Near the end of the story when, in a flashback, Jesse witnesses a lynching
- **Antagonist:** Racism, white supremacy
- **Point of View:** Close third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Sneaky surveillance. Baldwin was one of the many Black writers the FBI spied on during the Civil Rights Movement, at the behest of then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Baldwin's file was 1,884 pages long and full of speculation about the deeper political messages in his books.

Writer or protestor? Throughout his life, Baldwin moved between the role of writer observing the Civil Rights Movement and protestor actively involved in planning marches and campaigns. In one of his more active moments, Baldwin met with then-Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to urge Kennedy to take anti-Black racism in America more seriously.

PLOT SUMMARY

"Going to Meet the Man" takes place in an unnamed town in the American South in the early 1960s. Jesse—a 42-year-old white police officer—is unable to stay erect while having sex with his wife Grace. As she falls asleep, Jesse tells her about his difficult day at work, using racist slurs and degrading language when referring to Black people. He explains how civil rights protestors blocked traffic while standing in line to register to vote, and how, even in the face of arrests from his fellow officer **Big Jim C.**, they refused to move. Jesse's job was to make the jailed protestors stop **singing**, so he targeted the protest leader, feeling both disgust and excitement as he tortured the man. Despite nearly passing out, the protestor refused to ask the others to stop singing.

Jesse stops speaking and the story becomes a flashback. The protestor reminds Jesse that they met years ago when Jesse worked for a mail-order business. In another flashback, Jesse remembers meeting the protestor as a boy when coming to collect payment from the boy's grandmother. The boy subtly chides Jesse for not using his grandmother's full name (referred to her only as "Old Julia"). Back in the jailhouse, Jesse is full of rage and beats the protestor more aggressively, appalled to find himself sexually aroused. He leaves the cell and thinks about how the times have changed with all of this protesting—Black people used to be agreeable and keep to themselves, while white people used to feel safe and in control.

Back in the present, Jesse suddenly remembers lines from a Black spiritual. In a new flashback, Jesse is an eight-year-old boy driving home with his mother and father, hearing Black people in town singing the song from across the fields. His father suggests that they are singing for an unnamed "him." The next day, several cars full of white neighbors pull up to Jesse's house and Jesse's father asks if "they got him." The neighbors say yes, laughing, and Jesse's family joins them on the road to witness the lynching. Jesse asks if they are "going to see the bad nigger—the one that knocked down old Miss Standish?" His mother implies the answer is yes, and Jesse wishes that he could ask his Black friend Otis what was happening, since Otis knew everything.

At their destination, hundreds of excited white people are watching a naked Black man being dropped into a fire while hanging from his hands. At first, Jesse feels the spectators' delight is "more acrid than smoke," but, moments later, he begins "to feel a joy he had never felt before." One of Jesse's father's friends castrates the lynching victim and then he is dropped into the fire for the last time. Suddenly Jesse feels deep love for his father, sensing that he carried Jesse through an important test. Back in the present, Jesse finds himself aroused by the memories of watching the lynching and beating the protest leader. Unashamed this time, he has aggressive sex with Grace, whispering, "I'm going to do you like a nigger" and he thinks excitedly of the morning to come.

CHARACTERS

Jesse – Jesse, the protagonist of "Going to Meet the Man," is a racist 42-year-old white police officer who lives with his wife Grace in the American South in the early 1960s. Part of Jesse's job involves squashing civil rights protests alongside his coworker **Big Jim C.** After arresting several members of a voting rights protest, Jesse is tasked with making them stop **singing** and almost beats the protest leader to death in the process. Jesse hates the protest leader and all of the young Black people trying to make change, but he was not always full of racist rage. As a child, he had a Black friend named Otis whom he cared for and respected. He started to embrace violence against Black people after his father and mother took him to witness a lynching. Watching the lynching victim be castrated and killed as hundreds of white people shouted in glee, Jesse was informally inducted into his racist white community. As an adult, Jesse has trouble staying erect while having sex with Grace, but he becomes aroused thinking about violence against Black men. Though he sometimes feels shame about this, by the end of the story he does not, having aggressive sex with Grace and telling her, "I'm going to do you like a nigger." After feeling angry and powerless, Jesse suddenly feels optimistic and free.

Protest Leader – The protest leader is a college-aged Black man who lives in the same town as Jesse and has been leading protests in the area for at least the past year. He first met Jesse around ten ago when he was a child, since his grandmother (Julia Blossom) was one of Jesse's customers when he was working for a mail-order business. As a child, the protest leader refused to allow Jesse to refer to his grandmother as "Old Julia" and, as an adult, he asks Jesse if he has learned to call Black women by their real names yet. Jesse almost beats the protest leader to death trying to get him to instruct the other jailed protestors to stop **singing**, but the protest leader refuses. In this way, he represents the lasting power of the civil rights movement, a force that racist white men like Jesse cannot stop.

Jesse's Father – Jesse's father, married to Jesse's mother, raised Jesse to become a racist like him. In an extended flashback, he mocks Black peoples' **singing** in front of Jesse and teaches him to mistrust his Black friend Otis. He ultimately takes Jesse to witness a brutal lynching, putting Jesse onto his shoulders so he can watch the entire event unobstructed. After watching the lynching victim be castrated and killed, Jesse feels deep love for his father and thinks that he "had revealed to [Jesse] a great secret which would be the key to his life forever." In this way, Jesse's father's presence in the story shows how racism is passed on from one generation to the next.

Lynching Victim – The lynching victim is a Black man who lived

in Jesse's town when Jesse was a child and was accused of attacking (and, mostly likely, raping) a white woman named Miss Standish. He tries to flee but is captured, castrated, and lynched in front of Jesse, Jesse's father, Jesse's mother, and hundreds of cheering white people. His lynching is particularly brutal in that he is lowered into and raised out of fire several times before being castrated, stoned, and burned once more. How Jesse feels in relationship to the lynching victim demonstrates his shift from caring about Black people to dehumanizing them.

Jesse's mother – Jesse's mother attends the lynching with a young Jesse and Jesse's father, dressing up for the occasion. She is not as important as Jesse's father in teaching Jesse how to be overtly racist—in fact, she discourages her husband from mocking the **singing** of the Black people in town as they mourn the coming death of the lynching victim. Still, by dressing up for the lynching, watching it in awe, and casually laughing with her friends afterward, she represents a passive acceptance of the racist status quo.

Grace – Grace is a white Southern woman married to Jesse. Jesse is unable to stay erect while having sex with her and wishes he could ask her to do what he would ask a "nigger girl" to do, but he can't because she's his wife. Grace tells him to go to sleep and falls asleep herself. After reflecting on memories of racial violence, Jesse wakes her up to have aggressive sex with her and Grace moans, but it is unclear if she wants to be having sex or is another victim of his sexual compulsions.

Otis – Otis is a Black child and one of Jesse's friends when he was eight years old. Before the lynching, in a flashback, a young Jesse worries that he has not seen Otis for a couple mornings and wishes that he could ask Otis what was happening since "Otis knew everything." Otis does not directly appear in the story, but Jesse's care and respect for him as a child shows how white people are not born racist but taught to be so.

Julia Blossom ("Old Julia") – Julia Blossom is the grandmother of the protest leader and was one of Jesse's customers when he worked for a mail-order business. Julia does not appear in the story, but she is a point of contention between the protest leader and Jesse; her grandson takes issue with the fact that Jesse would refer to her as "Old Julia" rather than by her full name. This is further evidence of Jesse's consistent disrespect for and dehumanization of Black people.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SEXUALITY, PLEASURE, AND RACIAL VIOLENCE

Set in the South of the 1960s, "Going to Meet the Man" opens with Jesse, a 42-year-old white police officer, trying to have sex with his wife. But as he struggles to become erect and Grace drifts off to sleep, Jesse starts remembering scenes from his past, including beating a Black protest leader nearly to death earlier that day and witnessing a brutal lynching as a child. What those moments have in common is his sexual arousal while watching racial violence against Black men. Recalling these events, Jesse becomes erect and is finally able to have sex with Grace. By having Jesse experience pleasure while witnessing or enacting violence, Baldwin subverts the idea that anti-Black racism is simply a matter of white people hating Black people, suggesting that it also involves white people envying and desiring Black people. This is particularly true, Baldwin suggests, for white men (like Jesse) who crave the sexual prowess they project onto Black men.

Baldwin establishes early on that Jesse, like most racists, feels deep hatred toward Black people. While lying in bed with his wife at the beginning of the story, Jesse says, seemingly out of the blue, "Goddamn the niggers," before referring to Black people as "black stinking coons." His comfortable use of slurs demonstrates the depth of his anti-Black racism. In addition to using slurs, Jesse dehumanizes Black people at several points in the story. Of Black people, he thinks, "They were animals, they were no better than animals," and about the protest leader, he thinks "*this ain't no nigger, this is a goddamn bull.*" Beyond simply using violent language to refer to Black people, Jesse also imagines and enacts violence against them, thinking about how much easier it would be to bomb all of the Black people in town if they all lived in one place, and also violently beating a Black protestor almost to death.

Despite his conscious rejection of Black people, Jesse unconsciously experiences pleasure in his interactions with them, demonstrating that racism is also about sexualization and desire. After being unable to stay erect while having sex with his wife, Jesse reflects that he doesn't have this problem with the Black women he picks up or arrests. This memory of being with Black women causes a "distant excitement" in him. Later in the story, in a flashback to beating a Black protest leader nearly to death earlier that day, Jesse "began to hurt all over with that particular excitement" and later shouts at the protestor that he is lucky that white men like him "*pump* some white blood" into "Black bitches." To his horror, this moment of uncontrollable sexualized rage leads him to become erect. Furthermore, in a flashback to witnessing a lynching as a child, Jesse watches a crowd of white people laugh and cheer in pleasure as the lynching victim is tortured and Jesse himself starts to feel "a joy he had never felt before."

The story explicitly connects white racial violence against Black

men to the sexual prowess that white people like Jesse project onto Black men. While witnessing the lynching, a young Jesse notices the lynching victim's penis and thinks about how it is "much bigger than his father's…the largest thing he had ever seen till then." In having Jesse compare the size of the penis to his father's (a stand in for his own adult penis), Baldwin shows that white men's anger toward Black men stems from envy about not measuring up sexually. Then, after thinking about the lynching, Jesse has aggressive sex with Grace, telling her, "I'm going to do you like a nigger," and exerting himself more than he ever had before. The fact that Jesse is only able to sustain an erection while channeling the sexual vitality he believes a Black man to have underlines his envy of that perceived sexual prowess.

By zeroing in on the sexual undertones of racial violence, Baldwin suggests that racism is not simply about hatred or rage. Jesse, unable to accept or name his jealousy of Black men, acts out in violence toward them while also, at least in bed with his wife, wanting to be them. Jesse's sense of power and relief at the end of the story will not be sustainable, Baldwin suggests, since he is unable to reconcile these underlying feelings.

CIVIL RIGHTS, PROGRESS, AND RESISTANCE

Throughout "Going to Meet the Man," Jesse responds resentfully to the gains of the civil rights movement. While lying in bed next to his sleeping wife, he remembers the excitement of jailing and beating a young Black civil rights protest leader, reflects on how white people have lost the camaraderie and sense of ease they had before the civil rights movement began, and thinks fondly of witnessing a brutal lynching as a child. After becoming aroused by these memories, Jesse has sex with his wife Grace, thinking of the new day to come. Despite Jesse's optimism at the end of the story, Baldwin is careful to establish that Jesse—and other Southern whites like him—are fighting a losing battle; the progress of the civil rights movement cannot be stopped.

On the surface of the story, it seems like Jesse, as a white male police officer, has all of the power in this society. As becomes clear in a brief reflection at the start of the story, Jesse can arrest and rape Black women with no accountability; when he "wanted more spice than Grace could give… he would drive over yonder and pick up a black piece or arrest her, it came to the same thing." Later in the story, Jesse beats the protest leader "until he looked as though he were dead," torture that is sanctioned by his fellow police officers like **Big Jim C.** Jesse also proves that he has power not only in relation to Black people but also power over his wife; at the end of the story, he moves her body and starts having aggressive sex with her while she is still asleep.

But Jesse's power and privilege are being challenged by the progress of the civil rights movement. Jesse notes, while torturing the protest leader, that he has seen the man at several other protests over the past year, hinting that the civil rights movement has significant momentum and has not been affected by any of Jesse and Big Jim C.'s attempts to squash it. Furthermore, though Jesse and Big Jim C. are able to break up that day's protest and jail many of the protestors, they are unable to stop them from **singing** their songs of resistance even while jailed. The power of the songs signifies the power of the movement itself. And just before the bloodied protest leader passes out, he tells Jesse that he and his fellow activists won't stop singing until white men like him lose their minds, suggesting that intimidation strategies will not work. Jesse also worries about the protestors in town gaining access to weapons because "the whole world was doing it, look at the European countries and all those countries in Africa." This is a reference to the successful revolutionary and decolonial resistance movements that were happening worldwide in the early 1960s, showing that the civil rights movement was part of something much larger and could not easily be squelched.

Jesse's anxious internal reflections also demonstrate that he is aware, on some level, that he is fighting a losing battle. After Jesse is unable to force the protest leader to make the other protestors stop singing, he thinks about how he and his white male friends are soldiers outnumbered in a racial war and that "It would have been a help…or at least a relief, even to have been forced to surrender." This shows how tired he is of fighting a losing battle; he's on the brink of giving up, secretly hoping to be defeated. And such a forced surrender seems imminent; when thinking about searching all of the homes of Black people in town to strip them of their weapons, Jesse decides against it since "this might have brought the bastards from the North down on their backs," again suggesting the power of the movement and its ability to mobilize resistance. At the end of the story, after recalling a lynching he witnessed as a child, Jesse is able sustain an erection during sex with Grace and thinks excitedly of the morning to come. Though this suggests a newfound optimism about his power, the fact that Jesse has to think about an event that happened over 30 years ago to feel secure suggests he is living in denial and will only be disappointed by the continued progress of the movement.

By having Jesse wield his power against Black people and women, Baldwin demonstrates that, at this point in history, white men like Jesse (especially police officers) did have a real advantage. At the same time, by having the civil rights protestors demonstrate their own power and by showing Jesse's deep anxieties about losing his, Baldwin shows that the gains of the civil rights movement would continue. Men like Jesse could, Baldwin suggests, try to repress or deny this reality, but sooner or later they would have to face the truth.

LEARNING RACISM

Jesse—the white Southern police officer at the center of the story—reflects bitterly on all aspects of Black culture and Black life, sometimes out loud to his sleeping wife and sometimes within his own mind. In a memory that comes near the end of the story, Jesse is eight years old and does not yet possess the same racist rage. In fact, his closest friend at the time is a Black child named Otis, whose intellect he respects. It is not until Jesse's father and Jesse's mother take him to witness a brutal lynching, surrounded by hundreds of other white people, that he transforms from an open-minded child to an overtly racist young man. By allowing readers a glimpse of Jesse before having internalized a racist ideology, Baldwin implies that racism is a learned response white children adopt in order to be accepted by their community, not an inherent part of a person's character. Further, by closing their hearts and minds, Baldwin suggests that racism hurts white people, too.

Despite Jesse's extreme racism as an adult, eight-year-old Jesse sees Black people as human, implying that white people are not born racist. In the flashback to Jesse as a child, he thinks fondly of Otis, a Black friend he cares for deeply. He has not seen Otis for two days and, based on his parents' strange behavior leading up to the lynching, he worries for Otis's safety. Jesse does not understand what is happening and wishes he could ask Otis because Otis "knew everything," showing that Jesse not only cared for Otis but also respected his intellect—signs that he saw him much more fully than the Black people he meets as an adult. On the way to the lynching, Jesse notices that all of the Black people he normally sees in the fields along the road are missing. Rather than celebrate their absence the way adult Jesse might, young Jesse feels worried and reflects fondly on memories of them tipping their hats and smiling, "their eyes as warm as the sun."

It is not until witnessing the way that his father, mother, and hundreds of other white people respond to the lynching that Jesse learns how to dehumanize Black people. While watching the lynching victim hanging by his hands, still alive, Jesse sees him as a person at first, noticing, for example, how he had a widow's peak in his hair just like Jesse and Jesse's father. He wonders, "*What did the man do? What did he do?*" suggesting that he has not yet accepted the racist belief that Black people inherently deserve to be mistreated. He also feels that the spectators' delight is "more acrid than smoke." But after Jesse notices his parents' and the crowd's positive reactions to the lynching—his mother's eyes are "very bright" and his father's are "peaceful"—he starts to embrace the violence as well, even wishing that he were the man castrating the victim. He has recognized that he will be celebrated by his community for engaging in racist violence, rather than belittled for caring about Black people as he had in the past. Jesse feels full of love for his father, reflecting on how he "had revealed to [Jesse] a great secret which would be the key to his life forever." The secret, Baldwin suggests, is embracing racism.

Though Jesse has clearly materially benefited from embracing racism, Baldwin hints that, at an emotional level, learning to be racist hurts white people, too. Early in the story, Jesse remembers how he offered candy to a Black child (a younger version of the civil rights protest leader he beats up in jail) who told him, "I don't want nothing you got, white man." Through this child, Baldwin suggests that white people are not actually in an enviable position, despite all their privilege. Jesse also unconsciously senses his own racial wound. While recalling moments of watching Black people **singing**, he reflects on how, looking into their eyes, he sensed that some of them "were singing for mercy for his soul, too." In other words, they saw that, through dehumanizing them, he had lost a part of himself. Jesse is also unable to connect with people in his life the way he could with Otis—certainly not Black people, but not white people either. What he and his white male friends had in common was a shared commitment to upholding the racist status quo and, without that, he no longer trusts anyone in his life.

By juxtaposing an open-hearted eight-year-old Jesse with a bitter 42-year-old Jesse, Baldwin demonstrates how white people in the early twentieth century were granted power and privilege by embracing racism, but it came at an emotional cost, especially as the world around them was rapidly advancing. White people are not born racist, Baldwin suggests, but taught by parents and elders how to be so, and stopping that cycle will benefit all.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SINGING

Throughout "Going to Meet the Man," singing symbolizes communal power and strength. This symbol is introduced near the beginning of the story when Jesse tells Grace about his day at work, how he was tasked with making Black civil rights protestors in jail stop their coordinated singing. Jesse targets the protest leader, asking him to tell the others to stop singing, but, despite being tortured almost to death, the man refuses, showing how the protestors are intentionally using song to maintain their power in the face of oppression.

Later, after moving through rage at the protestors' refusal, Jesse reflects on other times he has heard Black people sing, specifically recalling singers who he felt were asking for mercy from God. Historically speaking, throughout slavery and Jim Crow, Black Americans used spirituals to connect with each

other and stay strong in the face of extreme racial violence.

Singing returns near the end of the story as Jesse is reflecting on how white people are losing the race war and, suddenly, the lyrics of a Black spiritual pop into his mind. He remembers hearing the song coming over the fields the night before witnessing a lynching as a child, how his father suggested they were singing for the man about to be killed. Again, in the face of violence, Black characters use song to express their feelings and stay strong. The following day, a young Jesse hears cars and cars of white people singing on their way to witness the lynching, a symbol of the power white people held at the time.

BIG JIM C.

Big Jim C.—a police offer who tortures Black civil rights protestors alongside Jesse—symbolizes the violence of the Jim Crow laws that upheld racial segregation in the U.S. South from the 1870s through 1965. Big Jim C. is introduced near the beginning of the story when Jesse tells Grace about his day, describing how Black protestors had formed a line at the courthouse to register to vote and "wouldn't stay where Big Jim C. wanted them to." This is a nod to the way that Jim Crow physically limited where Black people were allowed to go, requiring them to use "Colored" bathrooms, water fountains, and more. Despite the fact that Jesse and Big Jim C. beat the protestors and throw them in jail, the protestors continue to **sing** their songs of resistance, signifying the era of equality that is to come.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Going to Meet the Man: Stories* published in 1995.

Going to Meet the Man Quotes

❝ This was his wife. He could not ask her to do just a little thing for him, just to help him out, just for a little while, the way he could ask a nigger girl to do it. He lay there, and he sighed. The image of a black girl caused a distant excitement in him, like a far-away light[.]

Related Characters: Jesse, Grace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the beginning of the story, when Jesse and Grace are in bed together and Jesse is unable to become erect during sex. It establishes both that Jesse is unfaithful to his wife, and also that it is easy for him to sexualize Black people. He sees white women like Grace as somehow set apart from Black women whom he sleeps with; she is "his wife" and they are "nigger girls." Despite this overt racism, he also clearly longs for Black women. This is Baldwin's way of complicating how racism is often seen as pure rejection of Black people, rather than also containing elements of pleasure and desire.

Though thinking of Black women causes excitement in Jesse, it is a "distant" excitement, hinting that fantasizing about Black women alone is not enough for Jesse to become fully aroused. This moment foreshadows the scene at the end of the story when Jesse is finally able to become erect and have sex with Grace and is only able to do so by channeling the sexual prowess he perceives Black men to have. In other words, fantasizing about Black women isn't enough, because Jesse's underlying issue is envy toward Black men.

❝ "They had this line you know, to register"—he laughed, but she did not—"and they wouldn't stay where Big Jim C. wanted them, no, they had to start blocking traffic all around the court house so couldn't nothing or nobody get through, and Big Jim C. told them to disperse and they wouldn't move, they just kept up that singing, and Big Jim C. figured that the others would move if this nigger would move, him being the ring-leader, but he wouldn't move and he wouldn't let the others move, so they had to beat him and a couple of the others and they threw in the wagon…"

Related Characters: Jesse (speaker), Protest Leader

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

Lying in bed, Jesse tells Grace about what happened at work that day—Black civil rights protestors lined up outside the court house in town to register to vote, and Jesse's coworker Big Jim C. beat and arrested them. That Jesse laughs at Black people fighting for basic rights (and that Grace does not) shows the depths of his racism.

This passage makes it clear that Big Jim C. is a symbol for

the Jim Crow laws that upheld segregation in the South. Baldwin's description that the protestors "wouldn't stay where Big Jim C. wanted them" is a nod to the ways that Jim Crow laws controlled the movements of Black people, requiring them to use separate bathrooms, sit in the back of the bus, etc.

This is also the first time that singing appears in the story, a symbol for the communal strength of the protestors and the power of the civil rights movement. No matter how much Jim Crow tries to squash their progress, they continue to fight. This becomes even more clear as the story goes on and Jesse, like Big Jim C., is not able to force the protest leader to make the others stop singing.

"She's gone out?"

The boy said nothing.

"Well," he said, "tell her I passed by and I'll pass by next week." He started to go; he stopped. "You want some chewing gum?"

The boy got down from the swing and started for the house. He said, "I don't want nothing you got, white man." He walked into the house and closed the door behind him.

Related Characters: Jesse, Protest Leader (speaker), Julia Blossom ("Old Julia")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange occurs between Jesse and a child-aged version of the protest leader in a flashback. It is about ten years earlier and Jesse—then working for a mail-order business—has stopped by the boy's grandmother's house to collect payment from her.

Though Baldwin does not have Jesse reflect on his reaction to this moment, the fact that it stayed with him all these years suggests that he was deeply affected by it. In fact, after recalling this scene, Jesse ramps up his violence toward the present-day protest leader lying in his jail cell.

He began to tremble with what he believed was rage, sweat, both cold and hot, raced down his body, the singing filled him as though it were a weird, uncontrollable, monstrous howling rumbling up from the depths of his own belly, he felt an icy fear rise in him and raise him up, and he shouted, he howled, "You lucky we *pump* some white blood into you every once in a while—your women! Here's what I got for all the black bitches in the world—!" Then he was, abruptly, almost too weak to stand; to his bewilderment, his horror, beneath his own fingers, he felt himself violently stiffen—with no warning at all…

Related Characters: Jesse (speaker), Protest Leader

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

After remembering the boy-aged version of the protest leader calling him "white man," Jesse's anger toward the protest leader increases. In this moment, like the one at the very end of the story, Jesse loses control and, howling like an animal, reveals the sexual undertones of his racism. By screaming at the protest leader that he is lucky white men "pump some white blood" into Black women, Jesse reveals his need to prove his sexual prowess to Black men. His desire to have sex with Black women is, at the root, a desire to compete with (and beat) Black men.

This is not conscious, of course. Jesse's "bewilderment" and "horror" at becoming erect shows that he does not understand the ways that his sexuality is tied to his racism. Still, these moments leak out of him. This scene foreshadows the final scene in the story when, unlike in this one, he does not feel shame at envying the sexual prowess he projects onto Black men, but embraces the fact and is finally able to become erect with his wife.

It is noteworthy that the protestors' on-going singing is a major trigger for Jesse's eruption. As a symbol for the communal strength of the civil rights movement, the singing reminds Jesse that he does not have the power in this situation, likely leading him to crave it even more desperately.

> They felt themselves mysteriously set at naught, as no longer entering into the real concerns of other people—while here they were, out-numbered, fighting to save the civilized world. They had thought that people would care—people didn't care; not enough, anyway, to help them. It would have been a help, really, or at least a relief, even to have been forced to surrender.

Related Characters: Jesse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jesse reflects on how he and his white male friends feel abandoned by other white people as they try to stop the growing power of Black people via the civil rights movement. This is the first time in the story that Jesse admits to feeling vulnerable. His desire for the relief of surrender suggests the true power of the civil rights movement and shows that even the white public is coming to support the fight for racial justice.

This reflection also shows how racism hurts white people, too. Unable to connect over anything but their shared racial rage, Jesse and his friends feel they must keep fighting even when they want to surrender. Baldwin is not suggesting that white men are the true victims they experience themselves to be ("out-numbered, fighting to save the civilized world"), but that they are victims of their own racism; white men like Jesse were raised to believe hating Black people would offer them camaraderie and community and, suddenly, that is no longer true. Their only path out of this inner conflict would be, as Jesse suggests, to give up their racial rage through surrender.

> Their friends, in other cars, stretched up the road as far as he could see; other cars had joined them; there were cars behind them. They were singing. The sun seemed, suddenly, very hot, and he was, at once very happy and a little afraid. He did not quite understand what was happening, and he did not know what to ask—he had no one to ask. He had grown accustomed, for the solution of such mysteries, to go to Otis. He felt that Otis knew everything. But he could not ask Otis about this.

Related Characters: Jesse, Otis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place in a flashback—Jesse is eight years old and in the car with his parents on the way to witness a lynching. That Jesse does not understand what is happening suggests that this will be the first lynching he has attended. This is significant because the lynching becomes a pivotal event in pushing Jesse toward embracing racism.

Here, though, Jesse thinks fondly of his Black friend Otis. Otis is not only someone Jesse cares about, but is also someone he respects intellectually—"Otis knew everything." This is a far cry from how Jesse feels about Black people as an adult, and it is Baldwin's way of suggesting that white people are not born racist but are taught by their parents and community members how to become such.

This is also the first time that white people sing in the story. Like in other moments, singing symbolizes communal strength, but this time it is white people demonstrating their strength and power by singing joyfully together on their way to witness the lynching. The singing reinforces their shared identity as white people and also teaches children like Otis that brutal racial violence is something to be celebrated.

> He had come this road many a time and seen women washing in the yard (there were no clothes on the clotheslines) men working in the fields, children playing in the dust; black men passed them on the road other mornings, other days, on foot, or in wagons, sometimes in cars, tipping their hats, smiling, joking, their teeth a solid white against their skin, their eyes as warm as the sun, the blackness of their skin like dull fire against the white or the blue or the grey of their torn clothes.

Related Characters: Jesse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

Jesse notices that he has not seen a single Black person on the drive to the lynching, though he usually sees people along this route. Jesse's fond recollections of the Black people on this road underlines the fact that, at eight years

old, he is an open-hearted child who has not yet internalized a racist ideology. He does not see Black people as monsters or animals (as he does as an adult), but as people going about their daily lives.

Jesse not only notices that Black people are missing but particularly misses positive things about them, such as their "eyes as warm as the sun," and their skin like "dull fire." Baldwin is attempting to show that, pre-socialization into white supremacy, white children have a deep capacity for caring about others regardless of race; white children, like all children, can see differences in skin color without associating those differences with a racial hierarchy. After witnessing the lynching, however, this starts to change, and Jesse begins to regard Black people as less than white people.

> The man with the knife took the nigger's privates in his hand, one hand, still smiling, as though he were weighing them. In the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger's privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier, too, much heavier, and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten; and huge, huge, much bigger than his father's, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest.

Related Characters: Jesse, Lynching Victim

Related Themes:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, an eight-year-old Jesse—alongside hundreds of other white people—is witnessing a lynching. As one of the white men prepares to castrate the lynching victim, Jesse notices, with fear, the size of the victim's genitals. Baldwin is naming something very important here: the idea that at the root of white male rage is envy over the penis size—and therefore the sexual prowess—of Black men. The penis of a Black man is so powerful, Jesse learns, that it must be forcibly cut from his body.

That Jesse compares the size of the man's genitals to his father's suggests that he is also comparing them to his own, or at least to the genitals he will grow into as an adult. By having Jesse notice that the lynching victim's penis is both "the largest thing he had ever seen till then" and "the blackest," Baldwin makes it clear that this is the moment sexuality and race become linked in Jesse's mind. It is clear from the rest of the story that this moment has influenced how Jesse has interacted with Black men in his present-day life.

Baldwin is not simply creating a fictional lynching scene to make a point, but basing this moment off of many real-life public castrations of Black men that took place in the first half of the twentieth century.

> "Well, I told you," said his father, "you wasn't never going to forget *this* picnic." His father's face was full of sweat, his eyes were very peaceful. At that moment Jesse loved his father more than he had ever loved him. He felt that his father had carried him through a mighty test, had revealed to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever.

Related Characters: Jesse's Father (speaker), Jesse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 248

Explanation and Analysis

Noticing his father's peacefulness in the aftermath of the lynching, Jesse makes meaning of the situation by concluding that his father must have taken him through a rite of passage. Rather than feel anger or disgust (and risk rupture in his relationship with his father as well as alienation from his extended white community), Jesse chooses to embrace what his father has embraced—brutal violence against Black people.

Jesse's sense that he has learned a key secret about life indicates that this is a turning point. Before the lynching, he was an open-minded and open-hearted child who loved his friend Otis. Here, after the lynching, he feels deep love for his father, a man who took him to witness brutal violence against a Black person who was not even tried for his supposed crimes. Baldwin uses this moment to show that white children, attuned to the emotions and behaviors of those around them, learn racism from their parents and community. In this moment, Jesse has learned from his father what it means to be a white man.

He thought of the boy in the cell; he thought of the man in the fire; he thought of the knife and grabbed himself and stroked himself and a terrible sound, something between a high laugh and a howl, came out of him and dragged his sleeping wife up on one elbow. She stared at him in a moonlight which had now grown cold as ice. He thought of the morning and grabbed her, laughing and crying, crying and laughing, and he whispered, as he stroked her, as he took her, "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you'd love a nigger."

Related Characters: Jesse (speaker), Grace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place at the very end of the story when Jesse is back in the present, lying in bed next to Grace. That Jesse is finally able to become erect after recalling episodes of violence against Black men shows how sexuality and racial violence are paired for him. By telling Grace "I'm going to do you like a nigger," Jesse finally lets the truth come out—his sexuality is centered on channeling the sexual power he perceives Black men to have.

Jesse's arousal while thinking about violence perpetrated against Black men makes total sense here at the end of the story; Baldwin has made it clear that Jesse was taught as a child to find pleasure in Black pain, especially in the emasculation of Black men.

Though Jesse thinks longingly of the morning as he has sex with Grace (Baldwin's way of suggesting that Jesse feels more optimistic about the future), readers can intuit that this optimism will be short-lived. The story to this point has made it clear that the civil rights movement will not be stopped, and that it is only in accepting this that Jesse can experience true relief.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GOING TO MEET THE MAN

Grace asks Jesse what's wrong and he says he isn't sure, that he might be tired. She suggests he is working too hard, and he shouts that it isn't his fault. He touches her chest and then tries again to have sex with her and fails, reflecting bitterly to himself about how he could "ask a nigger girl" to help him but he cannot ask his wife. The thought of a Black woman excites him, but only slightly.

Given the way that Jesse uses racial slurs, readers can intuit that he is a racist white man. Thinking of Black women arouses Jesse, showing the way that racial hatred and desire are linked for him, though thinking of Black women alone is not enough for him to become erect, suggesting there is still something missing.

Grace tells Jesse to go to sleep since he has a hard day tomorrow and he agrees, rolling onto his side. He holds onto Grace's breast and says, "Goddamn the niggers," before asking Grace, "Wouldn't you think they'd learn?" She moves his hand from her body and tells him that they will still be "out there" tomorrow and he should go to sleep.

Grace telling Jesse that they will still be "out there" tomorrow suggests that when Jesse says "niggers," he is specifically referring to the Black civil rights protestors that he has been monitoring as part of his job as a police officer. It's noteworthy that Jesse starts to think about the protestors while still holding onto his wife's breast, again suggesting a link between sexuality and racial rage. The fact that the protestors will still be "out there" tomorrow is also readers' first hint that the civil rights movement is going strong.

Lying down, Jesse listens to the sounds outside. He hears a car on the road and reaches for his gun, but the car drives away. It's probably full of "liver-lipped students" from out of state, coming to town for an event at the courthouse tomorrow. "The niggers are getting ready," he thinks—but everyone else will be ready, too.

Jesse's fear of "liver-lipped students" is a reference to the fact that many of the civil rights protestors in the South in the early 1960s were Black college students who would travel to particularly racist precincts to protest. Jesse's fear that every sound outside might be the protestors suggests his deep anxiety about the power that the movement is generating; these aren't a couple people holding signs, this is a sophisticated and coordinated effort.

Jesse moans; he is a healthy, God-fearing 42-year-old man who didn't used to have trouble sleeping or becoming erect. In the past, he sometimes needed some "spice" and, as deputy sheriff, would "pick up a black piece or arrest her, it came to the same thing," though he couldn't do that now since they might kill him. He asks himself, "What had the good Lord Almighty had in mind when he made the niggers?" and implies that one answer is they are good at sex.

That Jesse can arrest and rape Black women without concern about punishment demonstrates that, despite the gains of the civil rights movement, he still has a lot of power as a white police officer. This passage also reveals that Jesse's anger toward Black people is complicated by his desire for them; he wants to declare them completely worthless but can't help thinking about the pleasure he has had with them during sex.

Turning toward Grace, Jesse thinks that he would like to be buried inside her and not have to go to work at the jail house tomorrow where he will have to confront the Black protestors and see their ugly faces, smell their smells, hear them sing, feel their hair, watch their breasts fight against his cattle prod, hear them moan, and watch their lips bleed.

It is noteworthy that, as Jesse lists sensations he is not *looking forward to at work tomorrow, they become more and more sexual. The detail with which he imagines feeling the Black protestors' hair, watching their breasts move, and hearing them moan indicates his deeper repressed desire for them.*

Comparing Black people to animals, Jesse condemns their dark smelly houses and incessant birthing of children, as well as their laughter and music. He remembers working as a payment collector for a mail-order business and how his Black customers were "too dumb to know they were being cheated blind," how easy it was for him to scare them into paying their bills. Recalling how he would sometimes offer the children candy and rub "their rough bullet heads," he has the thought that maybe he should have poisoned the treats.

This passage shows the depth of Jesse's racism; he considers Black people to be animals and too dumb to understand their own exploitation. He even wishes that he had killed the Black children he interacted with when he worked for a mail-order business. While this seems at first like an extension of his rage, it is also an example of his fear of the power of the civil rights movement—if he had killed the protestors as children, maybe they would not be changing the conditions of the society that, for so long, white men like him have easily controlled.


Thinking of the mail-order business reminds Jesse that he had trouble with one of his former customers' grandchildren just today. He starts to tell Grace about what happened, then asks if she is awake. She mumbles quietly, probably telling him to go to sleep, but he explains that this customer's grandson is now a protest leader. His coworker **Big Jim C.** "had to whip that nigger's ass today."

This passage introduces Big Jim C., Jesse's coworker and a symbol for the racist Jim Crow laws that the civil rights movement fought to change. That Big Jim C. could beat up a protestor with no accountability demonstrates the power that white police officers had while the movement was still underway.

Jesse explains with bitter laughter how the protestors had formed a line at the courthouse to register to vote, blocking traffic, **singing**, and refusing to move. Jesse's former customer's grandson was the protest leader, so **Big Jim C.** decided to target him, beating him and a few other leaders before taking them to jail. This is when Jesse got to the jail and was tasked with making the protest leaders stop their singing.

When Jesse says that the protestors formed a line "to register," it is a reference to the Black-led voter registration efforts that took place across the South in the early 1960s. Songs of resistance were also a common part of protests, a symbol for unity and strength. This passage suggests that while the protestors have their own form of power, Big Jim C. and Jesse have the power of weapons and the backing of the state.

Like **Big Jim C.**, Jesse decided to target the protest leader, who was already bleeding and moaning on the ground of his cell. Jesse prodded the man with his cattle prod and told him to make the protestors stop **singing**. When the man didn't respond, Jesse prodded him again and watched him roll around in his urine-stained pants, blood coming out of his mouth. Jesse pauses his story for a moment, noticing that he "began to hurt all over with that peculiar excitement." He then explains (more to himself now than to Grace) how he yelled at the man to stop not just the singing, but to stop disrupting the town with these protests.

The feeling of excitement that Jesse experiences while torturing the protest leader shows that racial violence and pleasure are deeply linked for him. His inability to make the protestors stop singing also highlights the power of the civil rights movement; no matter how much violence the police may bring, the protestors will not stop using their collective voice.


Jesse stops speaking and, in a flashback, he's prodding the protest leader as the man rolls in the dirt of the cell, unable to even scream in pain. Remembering he is not supposed to kill the man, Jesse stops for a minute, before angrily asking him if he's had enough. The man is silent, but the other protestors continue **singing** and Jesse instinctively kicks the man in the jaw, thinking to himself, "*this ain't no nigger, this is a goddamn bull.*" Again, he asks if the man has had enough, but the man is now unconscious. Jesse is shaking and he feels, for a minute, "close to a very peculiar, particular joy."

Jesse feels joy as he tortures the protest leader and again refers to it as "peculiar," suggesting he hasn't yet accepted the ways that pleasure and racial violence are linked for him. That Jesse switches from telling Grace the story to experiencing it as a flashback also hints that he is not comfortable admitting out loud that he becomes aroused by hurting Black men. The protestors' ongoing singing moves Jesse to violence because it reminds him that he does not have the power in this situation.

As Jesse moves to leave the cell, the protest leader calls out, "White man." Jesse stops in surprise and grabs his genitals, though he's not sure why. Badly injured on the floor, the man asks Jesse if he remembers "Old Julia," explaining that Mrs. Julia Blossom was his grandmother and asking if Jesse calls Black women by their names yet. Before passing out again, he tells Jesse that the protestors will not stop **singing** until white men like him lose their minds.

The protest leader's use of "white man" turns the tables on Jesse; suddenly he is the one being labeled based on his race. That he unconsciously grabs his genitals out of fear foreshadows Jesse's flashback to the public castration and lynching of a Black man. The protest leader confirms Jesse's worst fear that Black people like the protest leader have the power now and will not stop fighting until white people like Jesse lose their power.

Looking at the unconscious protest leader, Jesse suddenly remembers that this man—who he has seen at several protests over the past year—was indeed the grandson of Julia Blossom ("Old Julia"), one of his mail-order customers he hadn't seen in years. In another flashback, Jesse walks into Julia's yard and smiles at a 10-year-old version of the man, asking if Old Julia is home. The boy stares at him before answering, "Don't no Old Julia live here." Jesse insists that this is her house and the boy, calling Jesse "white man," says that nobody by that name lives here. The words *white man* echo in Jesse's head as he starts to call out for Old Julia. Julia doesn't respond.

This flashback within a flashback underlines how threatened Jesse is (and has been) by anyone challenging his power and reflecting his cruelty and whiteness back to him. He has clearly been used to demeaning Black people however he wants, and having a child challenge his power is deeply unsettling.

In the silence, Jesse sees the boy-aged version of the protest leader looking at him with malevolence and begins to feel that he is trapped in a nightmare. He asks the boy if Julia Blossom ("Old Julia") has gone out and, when the boy doesn't respond, he asks him to tell her he stopped by and will stop by again next week. He asks the boy if he wants chewing gum, to which the boy responds, "I don't want nothing you got, white man," before walking inside the house and closing the door.

This moment is significant in that Jesse has to face a Black person who is not amenable toward him; the boy rejects Jesse's gift and says he wants nothing else he has, either. Baldwin hints here that whiteness, even with all of the privilege it affords, is not necessarily desirable because white people (like Jesse) have been damaged by their own racism.

Back at the jail house, Jesse looks down at the protest leader's nearly dead body and thinks how he would like to pistol whip him until his head bursts open. Jesse begins to shake with what he thinks is rage, noticing that the protestors' **singing** has become "monstrous." Unable to control himself, he shouts to the man that he is lucky that white men like him "pump some white blood" into Black women, concluding with, "Here's what I got for all the black bitches in the world—!" To his horror, he feels himself become erect and promptly leaves the cell.

This passage reveals that, while Jesse is sometimes able to repress the sexual undertones of his racial rage, they sometimes leak out unexpectedly. It becomes clear that his ability to become erect hinges on the emasculation of Black men; by knocking out a powerful Black man, he feels both physically and sexually powerful. Meanwhile, the protestors' singing continues, suggesting that, while Jesse momentarily feels powerful, the movement for progress will persevere, undermining his power in the long run.

Still furious, Jesse starts to complain about the protesters' **singing**. The singing is familiar and oddly comforting. He understands that they are singing to God, asking for mercy for themselves and, sometimes, for him, too. He isn't sure what "their heaven" is like or what God could be for them, though it is probably the same for everyone. He tries to be a good person and it's not his fault that Black people go against the Bible. He concludes that he is only doing his duty by "protecting white people from the niggers and the niggers from themselves."

In a rare moment of self-awareness, Jesse considers that Black people singing spirituals might be singing for mercy for him, *hinting that he can see through their eyes the monster he has become. Unable to sit with this truth, he quickly switches back to demonizing Black people and viewing himself as their savior (rather than considering that they might be his).*

Jesse remembers that there are a lot of "good niggers" around who would smile and quietly thank him when it was over, which gives him a sense that this trouble will pass. The young protestors had changed the words to some of their songs—he hadn't looked at Black people when they were **singing** before, but he did not like the hatred he was seeing in these young peoples' faces, hatred that seemed harder than his club. Thinking of how worn out he is from work each day, he suddenly feels he is "drowning in niggers" and it will never end. He considers that maybe these songs are not about getting Black people into heaven but forcing white people into Hell.

This passage demonstrates the way that Jesse lives in denial, convincing himself that white people still have all the power despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. If he just focuses on memories of Black people who seem "agreeable," then he can access a sense of ease. Even still, the truth creeps back in as he remembers the protestors' singing. The fact that Black people are fighting back hits him as he feels he is "drowning in" crowds of seemingly hostile Black protestors.

The older white men who taught Jesse how to be a man have become quieter and less confident telling certain jokes. He misses the ease of how life used to be, before people stayed home with their families because they were afraid of what would happen next. There have been some bombings around town recently, and he worries what would happen if Black people got their hands on dynamite. Jesse and his white men friends have considered searching Black peoples' homes for weapons, but they worry protestors from the North would come down or that word would spread too quickly in the Black community for the search to be effective.

Here Jesse faces some truths he has been avoiding, namely that the civil rights movement has really changed things for him and his racist white friends; they can no longer attack Black people without worrying about being attacked back or being targeted by protestors. The reference to bombings and dynamite is likely Baldwin's way of situating this story in the midst of real-life attacks, such as the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham in 1963, in which four young girls were killed.

One problem is that Black men have access to guns through the Army and they could stockpile weapons like protestors in Europe and Africa. Jesse and his friends still curse the government and make jokes, but they are afraid to target the Black folks in town. It would be easier if the town were more overtly segregated, and they could set fire to all of the Black people by torching a single neighborhood. Despite the fact that any fire they set could spread and hurt their own families, he and his friends consider doing it anyway.

Baldwin offers even more historical context here, referencing the decolonial liberation movements that were taking place worldwide in the 1960s. Their mention suggests that the civil rights movement is part of a swell of resistance efforts that will not easily be stopped. The fact that Jesse cannot target the Black people in town without potentially hurting himself and other white families also shows that racism hurts white people, too.

While this racial conflict feels like war, Jesse and his friends have not developed the unspoken communication and trust of true soldiers. Without the privacy they used to have, and with increased public scrutiny, they can no longer assume that they are all on the same page. They are fighting to save the civilized world, yet no one cares anymore, at least not enough to help them. He and his friends are like accomplices in a crime, unsure who might betray the rest for money or simply for the ease of confession. A part of him craves the relief of being forced to surrender.

That Jesse admits a part of him craves the relief of surrendering to the civil rights movement suggests that he is aware that he and his white friends are fighting a losing battle—the movement, at this point, cannot be stopped. It also hints that on some level, he suspects that his life would be better if he accepted racial equality, too, since his life would no longer be defined by fighting.

Suddenly a line of a song comes to Jesse: *"I stepped in the river at Jordan."* He can hear the melody but can't place the song and quickly asks Grace if she is awake. She doesn't respond. More of the song comes to him: *"I stepped in the river at Jordan. / The water came to my knees."* He begins to sweat and feels a combination of fear and pleasure thinking of Black people **singing** this song. Even more lyrics come: *"I stepped in the river at Jordan. / The water came to my waist."*

These lines come from a Black spiritual, likely a version of either "Wade in the Water" or "River of Jordan." As with other times in the story, Baldwin is using singing to symbolize communal power and strength. Knowing a member of their community is about to be lynched, the Black people in town have come together to collectively grieve rather than isolate and hide.

In a flashback, it is nighttime, and Jesse is in a car between his mother and father, sleepy and excited. He hears the song coming over the fields. More lyrics come to Jesse. Jesse's father wearily suggests that they might be **singing** for "him" before adding that, even when mournful, Black people sound violent. Jesse's mother tells him not to talk that way, but he instead becomes more animated, whistling and mocking the singers. Jesse thinks about Otis, a Black friend his age with whom he plays. Suddenly the thought of Otis makes him sick and he starts to shiver, inspiring his mother to put her arm around him.

By suggesting that they might be singing for "him," Jesse's father is referencing the Black man that will soon be lynched. It becomes clear that Jesse has likely learned his racism from his father, who has no problem mocking Black people in mourning. It is noteworthy that Jesse has a Black friend at this point in life, which raises the question of what happened to him between then and now. That Jesse is suddenly feeling sick at the thought of Otis suggests that a change in his relationship to Otis (and Black people as a whole) is starting to take place.

Jesse says that he didn't see Otis this morning, though he's not sure why he says it. Jesse's mother responds that he hasn't seen Otis for a couple mornings, though Jesse only cares about *this* morning. Jesse's father suggests that Otis's parents were afraid to let him show himself, which confuses Jesse, who responds that Otis didn't do anything. His father explains that Otis *can't* do anything because he is a child, but that they want to make sure he *won't* do anything when he's older. His father asks Jesse to pass this warning onto Otis and he agrees.

Jesse, though only eight years old, is clearly picking up on something racially significant happening. He wants to make sure that his friend Otis is safe, and his father is teaching him that what matters is white people's safety, not Otis's. The warning that Jesse's father asks Jesse to pass onto Otis hints that Black people will be punished for hurting white people, foreshadowing the lynching to come.

That night in bed, Jesse is unable to sleep. The darkness weighs on him, and he wants to call to his mother but he knows his father wouldn't approve. He hears his father make a joke and feels even more afraid since he knows they will soon have sex, which they do. He hears them moaning and the bed rocking, noticing his father's breathing most of all.

Here Jesse's father, through his actions, is teaching Jesse that racial violence and sexual arousal go hand in hand. Though Jesse's parents also have sex other nights, it's significant that Jesse's father is interested in sex with the imminent lynching hanging in the air.

In the morning, eight white people in a car approach the house with excitement. Jesse's father runs to them and asks, "They got him, then?" Jesse recognizes some of the children. A woman in a fancy dress says yes, they found him early this morning. Jesse's father asks how far he got and one of the men tells him he didn't get far, he probably got lost in the trees or was so scared he couldn't move. This makes everyone laugh. One of the women adds he was found near a graveyard, and they laugh more.

This passage demonstrates that Jesse is learning racism not only from his parents but also from his extended white community. They are all experiencing pleasure at the thought of Black people's pain. The "him" they are referring to is the Black man whose fate the Black townspeople were mourning the night before.

Two more cars approach to join the conversation, and Jesse notices that everyone looks excited. They are also all carrying food, which makes it feel to Jesse like a Fourth of July picnic. The visitors encourage Jesse's father to hurry up and not to worry about food since they have enough for everyone. Jesse's parents prepare for the drive and Jesse notices that he can hear the sound of **singing** from the visitors' cars as they drive away.

Baldwin pulls from the history of actual lynchings here—many of them featured white people bringing food and gathering as if they were parties. Jesse has clearly never attended a lynching before, as everything is new to him. Like with other references to singing in this story, singing here signifies communal power. This time, it is white people singing in celebration to reinforce their collective power and carry the message over the fields to the Black members of the town.

Jesse gets in the car and sits close to his father, feeling he is about to go on a great journey. He asks if they are going on a picnic, thinking he knows where they're going without being sure. Jesse's father says, yes, they are going on a picnic, but "You won't ever forget *this* picnic—!" Jesse asks if they are "going to see the bad nigger" who knocked down old Miss Standish. Jesse's mother says they *might* see him.

Jesse intuits correctly that this is a rite of passage for him and shows that he understands what's happening: a Black man has been accused of attacking (and, readers can assume, probably raping) a white woman. The protection of white women was a common reason used for lynchings in real life, though many Black men were falsely accused.

Jesse has questions he wants to ask, such as "Will Otis be there?" but he doesn't ask them because, in an odd way, he feels he already knows the answer. He notices that their friends in the other cars are way up ahead, joined by many other cars. Cars have filled in behind Jesse's parents' car as well. He can hear **singing** coming from all of the cars. He feels both happy and afraid and does not understand what is happening or who to ask. He usually goes to Otis with such questions since "Otis knew everything," but he can't ask Otis about this. He hasn't seen Otis for two days, anyway.

Jesse's concern for Otis shows that, despite being around his overtly racist father for eight years, he still has not internalized that Black people are bad. He not only cares for Otis, but respects him intellectually, a far cry from how Jesse feels about Black people as an adult. The singing becomes an ominous sound in the background, this expression of white communal power not something a young Jesse wants to embrace.

Jesse hasn't seen any Black people so far on the drive. They are passing houses where he knows Black people live, and yet there is no sign of life. He is used to seeing women washing their clothes, children playing, men passing them in cars or walking on foot and smiling as they tip their hats, "their eyes as warm as the sun." Even the Black church is empty and locked up, the graveyard abandoned and without any flowers. Jesse wants to ask where everyone is but is too afraid to ask.

Jesse's fond recollections of the Black people in town underlines the fact that he is an open-hearted child who has not yet internalized a racist ideology. He not only notices that Black people are missing but particularly misses positive things about them, such as their friendliness and warm eyes.

The hill they are driving on gets steeper and the day feels colder. Jesse's mother and Jesse's father look straight ahead, seeming to listen to the **singing**. Suddenly, Jesse feels they are strangers to him, noticing his father's lips have a cruel curve, his body seems enormous, and his normally grey-green eyes now appear yellow. His mother looks in the car mirror and adjusts her bow, inspiring his father to laugh and say, "When that nigger looks at you, he's going to swear he throwed his life away for nothing."

Jesse's abrupt shift in how he sees his parents suggests that, on some level, he understands that what they are doing is wrong. That they are listening to the singing—going along with this expression of pleasure at someone else's pain—upsets him. Jesse's father's comment to his wife insinuates that Black men's desire for white women is the reason they must be punished.

They eventually make it to a sun-filled clearing where there are hundreds of people staring at something Jesse can't yet see, though he assumes there is a fire, since he can smell smoke. After parking, Jesse's father asks Jesse if he is all right. Jesse says yes. In the clearing, strangers greet Jesse, hugging and patting him, telling him how much he's grown, which confuses him. The wind blows smoke into his eyes and nose. He's too short to see anything, but he can hear the sounds of laughing, cursing, wrath, and something else. The spectators in the front of the crowd are full of delight at what they see, a joy that Jesse feels is "more acrid than the smoke."

Still not sure what is happening, Jesse can sense that something isn't right. Not having yet become a willing member of his racist white community, he views the other white people's pleasure as acrid, or bitterly unpleasant. He is learning from the people around him that pleasure and racial violence go hand in hand.

Jesse's father picks Jesse up and puts him on his shoulders, which grants him a view of the fire. He is able to make out a chain attached to a tree, and then two Black hands bound together by the chain. The lynching victim is dropped closer to the fire, smoke pours up, and the crowd cheers with delight before he is pulled upward again. As the man is pulled up, Jesse notices his sweating and bloody head, how black and tangled his hair is. He notices how the man's hanging head has a widow's peak, like he and his father both have. The man's face is mangled, dripping with blood and sweat, his hands held straight above his head.

Jesse's attunement to the experience of the lynching victim again suggests he is an open-hearted child not yet closed off to connection with Black people's humanity. By noticing that the lynching victim has a widow's peak just like Jesse and his father, he is seeing him as equal to them, as similar to them.

Jesse feels the urge to say something, but he doesn't know what. A man puts more wood on the fire and the crowd cheers. The fire grows larger, and Jesse thinks he hears the lynching victim scream. Sweat is pouring down the man's body as he is lowered and raised again. When the man screams again, blood bubbles out of his mouth, and Jesse clings to his father out of fear, though the man's scream is overtaken by the cheering of the crowd.

Jesse continues to see the lynching victim as a person while everyone around him sees the man as an object to be tortured. That Jesse thinks he hears the man scream over the crowd suggests that he is paying close attention to the man and is worried about him. He has not yet internalized the racist belief that he should feel pleasure at this man's pain.

Jesse notices that the lynching victim wants death to come quickly, but the crowd wants it to be slow, and they have the control. He wonders, *"What did the man do? What did he do?"* but doesn't feel he can ask his father. He is physically close to his father but experiences him as being very far away. Two of Jesse's father's friends are in charge of the chain now, but everyone there seems responsible for the fire. The lynching victim's pubic hair has been burned off, and Jesse smells something that is both sweet and rotten.

An open-minded child, Jesse is still trying to make sense of this violence in the terms he has clearly been taught: someone does something bad and is punished in proportion to the crime. He cannot understand what this man could've done to deserve torture like this (compared to his adult self, who comfortably tortured a Black man nearly to death earlier that day). Young Jesse's sense that everyone at the lynching is responsible for the fire hints that racial violence is not just about the people committing overt violence, but also about all the people who passively go along with it.

Jesse turns to look at his mother, whose face seems more beautiful than ever and also more strange. He feels a type of joy he has never felt before and regards the lynching victim's hanging body as the most beautiful and terrible object he has ever seen. As he watches one of his father's friends wield a knife, Jesse wishes that he were that man. The crowd laughs at the sight of the knife and Jesse's father tightens his grip on Jesse's legs. The man with the knife walks up to the hanging man's body. As he turns and smiles the crowd goes silent.

This passage is significant because this is the moment that Jesse turns his focus away from the experience of the lynching victim and towards the experience of his parents. Seeing his mother's joy, Jesse suddenly wishes that he could be the man wielding the knife so that she might look at him like that, too. He is starting to internalize the idea that perpetrating racism will earn him attention and love.

The lynching victim looks up, and the man with the knife smiles as he takes the hanging man's genitals in his hands, cradling them as if weighing them. Jesse feels his scrotum tighten as he notices how large the lynching victim's penis is, much larger than Jesse's father's, "the largest thing he had seen till then and the blackest." Suddenly the lynching victim is looking directly into Jesse's eyes and Jesse screams. Just then the man with the knife castrates the hanging man and the crowd screams, too.

That Jesse notices the size of the lynching victim's penis is noteworthy; here Baldwin suggests that at the root of white male rage is envy over the penis size—and therefore the sexual prowess—of Black men. Jesse compares the size to his father's, which readers can intuit is a stand-in for his own adult penis. Witnessing the man be castrated confirms in Jesse's mind that there is such power in the Black man's penis that it must be feared and destroyed. It is clear that this moment has informed Jesse's relationship to Black men as an adult.

The crowd rushes toward the bleeding and burned hanging man, tearing at his body with their hands, knives, and stones. Jesse's head falls downward toward his father's. Someone throws kerosene on the hanging body, and it is engulfed in flames. Jesse's father lowers Jesse to the ground and says that he knew Jesse would never forget *this* picnic. Jesse notices that, though his father is covered in sweat, his eyes are peaceful. Suddenly he feels he loves his father more than ever for carrying him through this mighty test that has revealed a key secret about life.

Noticing his father's peacefulness in the face of this extreme violence, Jesse makes meaning of the situation by concluding that his father must have taken him through a rite of passage. Rather than feel anger or disgust (and risk rupture in their relationship, as well as alienation from his community), Jesse chooses to embrace what his father has embraced—brutal violence against Black people. Jesse's sense that he has learned a key secret about life indicates that this is a turning point, likely the moment that leads to Jesse becoming a racist and bitter adult.

As Jesse's mother laughs with the other women, Jesse's father walks them toward the lynching victim's dead body. The man's head is torn apart and caved in, but it is hard to notice much else because his body is so charred. Jesse asks his father if they are going to leave the body there and his father says yes, they'll get him eventually, then suggests they get some food before it's all gone.

In the aftermath of the lynching, Jesse continues to notice the ways that pleasure and violence are linked in his white community—his mother is laughing, and his father is ready to consume some good food.

Back in the present, thinking of the protest leader in his cell, the lynching victim in the fire, and the knife that was used to kill him, Jesse becomes aroused and starts to touch himself, letting out a howling sound as he drags Grace awake. She stares at him and, laughing and crying, he starts having sex with her, whispering, "I'm going to do you like a nigger… love me just like you'd love a nigger." Grace moans and Jesse becomes aroused thinking of the coming morning, putting more effort into their sex than usual. Before he finishes, morning arrives.

Jesse's arousal while thinking about violence perpetrated against Black men makes sense now—he learned as a child to find pleasure in Black pain, especially in the emasculation of Black men. He tells Grace that he will "do [her] like a nigger" because it is only by channeling the perceived sexual prowess of Black men that he feels powerful. Though the story ends with Jesse feeling optimistic about the coming morning (a symbol for the future), readers can understand the perversion and racism that undergirds his optimism and can also sense that, given the power of the civil rights movement, his optimism will not last.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Mahon, Hanna. "*Going to Meet the Man.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 26 Sep 2021. Web. 26 Sep 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mahon, Hanna. "*Going to Meet the Man.*" LitCharts LLC, September 26, 2021. Retrieved September 26, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/going-to-meet-the-man.

To cite any of the quotes from *Going to Meet the Man* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Baldwin, James. Going to Meet the Man. Vintage. 1995.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Baldwin, James. Going to Meet the Man. New York: Vintage. 1995.