

Understanding Go Tell It on the Mountain **Theme – Church**

The church is a very important institution for the characters in the novel, as it is for many families across the country. For the African-American community in particular, the church has been a symbol of freedom and power since the era of slavery. Although the church was sometimes used by slaveholders as a means of controlling slaves, emphasizing meekness and obedience, for many African-Americans, the church was the place they learned about Joseph and Moses, the deliverance of an entire nation from poverty and slavery, and even the spiritual deliverance of the New Testament. The church became a place where secret meetings could be held and where hymns and spirituals were transformed into complex messages of escape and resistance. Even in Harlem at the time of the novel, the church had as much political power for African-Americans as it had spiritual power. Preachers like Marcus Garvey, and later, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and others used the institution of the church and the groundwork to mobilize the civil rights movement. It is no wonder that the characters in the novel see the church as such an important, even life-giving, institution, and spend so much time there.

Find five quotes that deal with the church. Write the quotes with the page numbers on the left. On the right, explain what the quote says about the role of the church in the characters' lives.

Quotes

Role

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

Understanding Go Tell It on the Mountain **Theme – Fatherhood**

One of the major themes in the novel is the sins of the father being passed down to the sons. Gabriel has not been a good father to his sons. He denied his first son, Royal, and allowed him to grow up fatherless and wild, lacking the direction and guidance that could have saved his life. His last son, Roy, grows up just as wild as Royal, even though he lives under Gabriel's example and teaching. Florence says that young Roy's wildness and self-destructive behavior is the consequence of Gabriel's wild youth and adultery. Even John, whom Gabriel adopts and promises to raise as his own, comes to realize the truth, that he is not Gabriel's natural child, because of the clear favoritism that Gabriel shows Roy over John. Even though Roy is clearly the troublemaker and the wild one, John receives all of his father's scorn and none of his love. Gabriel even blames Roy's behavior on John, accusing him of failing Roy as a brother while completely ignoring his own culpability in the situation. It is perhaps this painful father-son dynamic that causes John to be so wary of salvation. It must be fearsome for John to embrace a spiritual or heavenly "father" when all he knows of fatherhood is cruelty and hypocrisy.

Find five quotes that deal with fatherhood. Write the quotes with the page numbers on the left. On the right, explain what the quote says about fathers and fatherhood.

Quotes

Explain

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Understanding Go Tell It on the Mountain **Theme – Racism**

During Baldwin's career, Harlem was a kind of haven from racism for many black families, a place where their heritage was embraced and celebrated, where their people owned many of the businesses, where their own artists, poets, writers, and performers lived and worked among them. However, just outside of Harlem was the ever-looming threat of a society that seemed engineered to keep them from full citizenship and freedom. In Go Tell It on the Mountain, we see many different reactions to this racism, ranging from Roy's violence and John's anger, Richard's desperate defiance and suicide, Florence's strength, and Elizabeth's quietness. Even though the novel doesn't dwell on the racism directly, its effects are seen throughout the story, as if it were an unseen force that influenced the character's life, uncontrollable as the weather. Ultimately, by not making racism the central conflict of the novel, Baldwin does something very interesting: he makes racism seem like simply an undeniable reality of the characters' lives, a struggle that they have grown so accustomed to that it often goes unnoticed.

Find five quotes that deal with racism. Write the quotes with the page numbers on the left. On the right, describe the form the racism takes and its effects on the characters.

Quotes

Describe

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Understanding Go Tell It on the Mountain **Theme – Salvation**

The concept of salvation is one of the most important themes in the novel. In fact, it could be said that the main conflict of the novel is John's struggle with his own spirit. The salvation that the novel focuses on is a spiritual salvation, an acceptance of God and of Jesus as savior, and a desire for redemption from sin. It takes some time for John to embrace this salvation, even with so much encouragement from his family and church to do so. It seems as if there are certain beliefs, desires, or feelings that John is unwilling to let go of that hinder his salvation. However, salvation in the context of the novel also means deliverance from these very things, the cultural and familial forces that hold us back from achieving our true potential – things like racism, hatred, resentment, pride, doubt, and all of the other baggage that the world piles on us. In order for John to be truly "saved," he must first let go of all of these.

Find five quotes that deal with salvation. Write the quotes with the page numbers on the left. On the right, explain what the quote says about salvation.

Quotes

Attitude

1)

2)

3)

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