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Andrew J. Porter, Jr.

*Great Neck High School, N.Y.*

Henry L. Terrie, Jr.

*Dartmouth College*

Robert A. Bennett

## CONSULTANTS

Robert E. Beck, *English Consultant*

John Swett Unified School District  
Crockett, California

Sharon L. Belshaw, *English Instructor*

Hopkins Junior High School  
Fremont, California

Mary Gloyne Byler, *Consultant*

Association on American Indian Affairs  
New York, New York

Kenneth L. Chambers, *Asst. Professor*

Black Studies Department  
Wellesley College  
Wellesley, Massachusetts

Barbara Z. Chasen

Instructional Support Team  
Boston Public Schools  
Boston, Massachusetts

Paula Grier, *Education Consultant*

Intercultural Development Research Association  
San Antonio, Texas

Nicolás Kanellos, *Editor*

*Revista Chicano-Riqueña*  
University of Houston  
Houston, Texas

Ann Rayson, *Asst. Professor*

Department of English  
University of Hawaii at Manou  
Honolulu, Hawaii

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## The Creative Individual

James Baldwin (1924— ) grew up in the Harlem section of New York City. Like many American writers before him, however, he went to Paris to work out his relationship to himself and his country. In Paris he completed the first of many novels, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which was published in 1953. Some of Baldwin's other novels are: *Giovanni's Room* (1956), *Another Country* (1962), and most recently *Just Above My Head* (1979). Though he is a leading contemporary writer, Baldwin is perhaps best

known as a literary critic and social commentator.

Baldwin describes himself as a "public witness" to the situation of Blacks in America. His collections of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), and *No Name in the Street* (1972), attest to his skill as a witness. In "The Creative Dilemma," included here he presents the case for society's need of the critical artist.

## The Creative Dilemma

JAMES BALDWIN

PERHAPS THE PRIMARY distinction of the artist is that he must actively cultivate that state which most men, necessarily, must avoid: the state of being alone. That all men *are*, when the chips are down, alone, is a banality—a banality because it is very frequently stated, but very rarely, on the evidence, believed. Most of us are not compelled to linger with the knowledge of our aloneness, for it is a knowledge that can paralyze all action in this world. There are, forever, swamps to be drained, cities to be created, mines to be exploited, children to be fed. None of these things can be done alone. But the conquest of the physical world is not man's only duty. He is also enjoined to conquer the great wilderness of himself. The precise role of

the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.

The state of being alone is not meant to bring to mind merely a rustic musing beside some silver lake. The aloneness of which I speak is much more like the aloneness of birth or death. It is like the fearful aloneness that one sees in the eyes of someone who is suffering, whom we cannot help. Or it is like the aloneness of love, the force and mystery that so many have extolled and so many have cursed, but which no one has ever understood or ever really been able to control. I put the matter this way, not out of any desire to create pity

for the artist—God forbid!—but to suggest how nearly, after all, is his state the state of everyone, and in an attempt to make vivid his endeavor. The states of birth, suffering, love, and death are extreme states—extreme, universal, and inescapable. We all know this, but we would rather not know it. The artist is present to correct the delusions to which we fall prey in our attempts to avoid this knowledge.

It is for this reason that all societies have battled with that incorrigible disturber of the peace—the artist. I doubt that future societies will get on with him any better. The entire purpose of society is to create a bulwark against the inner and the outer chaos, in order to make life bearable and to keep the human race alive. And it is absolutely inevitable that when a tradition has been evolved, whatever the tradition is, the people, in general, will suppose it to have existed from before the beginning of time and will be most unwilling and indeed unable to conceive of any changes in it. They do not know how they will live without those traditions that have given them their identity. Their reaction, when it is suggested that they can or that they must, is panic. And we see this panic, I think, everywhere in the world today, from the streets of New Orleans to the grisly battleground of Algeria.<sup>1</sup> And a higher level of consciousness among the people is the only hope we have, now or in the future, of minimizing human damage.

The artist is distinguished from all other responsible actors in society—the politicians, legislators, educators, and scientists by the fact that he is his own test tube, his own laboratory, working according to very rigorous rules, however unstated these may be, and cannot allow any consideration to supersede his responsibility to reveal all that he can possibly discover concerning the mystery of the human

being. Society must accept some things as real; but he must always know that visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and achievement rests on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven. One cannot possibly build a school, teach a child, or drive a car without taking some things for granted. The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.

I seem to be making extremely grandiloquent claims for a breed of men and women historically despised while living and acclaimed when safely dead. But, in a way, the belated honor that all societies tender their artists proves the reality of the point I am trying to make. I am really trying to make clear the nature of the artist's responsibility to his society. The peculiar nature of this responsibility is that he must never cease warring with it, for its sake and for his own. For the truth, in spite of appearances and all our hopes, is that everything is always changing and the measure of our maturity as nations and as men is how well prepared we are to meet these changes and, further, to use them for our health.

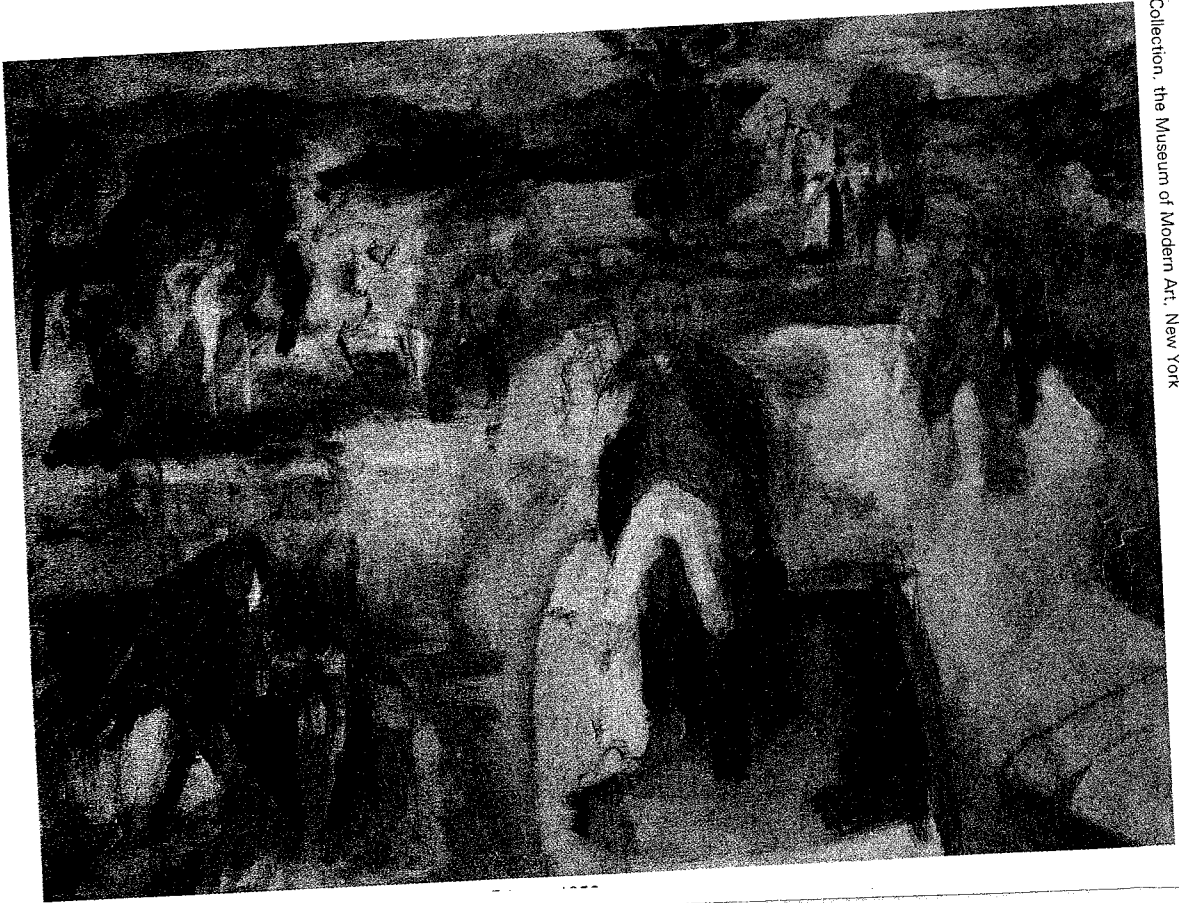
Now, anyone who has ever been compelled to think about it—anyone, for example, who has ever been in love—knows that the one face that one can never see is one's own face. One's lover—or one's brother, or one's enemy—sees the face you wear, and this face can elicit the most extraordinary reactions. We do the things we do and feel what we feel essentially because we must—we are responsible for our actions, but we rarely understand them. It goes without saying, I believe, that if we understood ourselves better, we would damage ourselves less. But the barrier between oneself and one's knowledge of oneself is high indeed. There are so many things one would rather not know! We become social creatures because

<sup>1</sup> Algeria: Baldwin refers to the fighting then taking place in this colonial French North African country during the rebellion against France.

we cannot live any other way. But in order to become social, there are a great many other things that we must not become, and we are frightened, all of us, of those forces within us that perpetually menace our precarious security. Yet the forces are there; we cannot will them away. All we can do is learn to live with them. And we cannot learn this unless we are willing to tell the truth about ourselves, and the truth about us is always at variance with what we wish to be. The human effort is to bring these two realities into a relationship resembling reconciliation. The human beings whom we respect the most, after all—and sometimes fear the most—are those who are most deeply involved in this delicate and strenuous effort, for they have the unshakable authority that comes only from having looked

on and endured and survived the worst. That nation is healthiest which has the least necessity to distrust or ostracize or victimize these people—whom, as I say, we honor, once they are gone, because somewhere in our hearts we know that we cannot live without them.

The dangers of being an American artist are not greater than those of being an artist anywhere else in the world, but they are very particular. These dangers are produced by our history. They rest on the fact that in order to conquer this continent, the particular aloneness of which I speak—the aloneness in which one discovers that life is tragic, and therefore unutterably beautiful—could not be permitted. And that this prohibition is typical of all emergent nations will be proved, I have no doubt, in many ways during the next fifty



Collection, the Museum of Modern Art, New York

years. This continent now is conquered, but our habits and our fears remain. And, in the same way that to become a social human being one modifies and suppresses and, ultimately, without great courage, lies to oneself about all one's interior, uncharted chaos, so have we, as a nation, modified and suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history. We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. This is also true of nations. We know how a person, in such a paralysis, is unable to assess either his weaknesses or his strengths, and how frequently indeed he mistakes the one for the other. And this, I think, we do. We are the strongest nation in

the Western world, but this is not for the reasons that we think. It is because we have an opportunity that no other nation has of moving beyond the Old World concepts of race and class and caste, to create, finally, what we must have had in mind when we first began speaking of the New World. But the price of this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record. For an artist, the record of that journey is most clearly revealed in the personalities of the people the journey produced. Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself and, with that revelation, to make freedom real.

**Discussion**

1. According to Baldwin, what is the role of the artist in society? Why is the artist especially qualified for that role?
2. In Baldwin's view, why does society tend to reject the artist? Why is it important nevertheless for the artist to insist on playing a part in society?
3. What is Baldwin's explanation for the fact that artists are not usually honored during their lifetimes?
4. Why does Baldwin say that the artist has a special role in America?
5. What, then, is the creative dilemma of the artist? How is the relationship between an artist and society described?

**Composition**

1. Summarize Baldwin's essay in your own words. Be sure to include each of his points. Conclude with a statement on whether or not you agree with his position on the artist's role in society and why.
2. Baldwin makes this statement in "The Creative Dilemma": "We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself [herself] the truth about his [her] past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his [her] undiscovered self." Write a descriptive narrative of a situation, either real or imaginary, which supports this statement. Be sure to describe the past and tell how it trapped the person. Tell how an examination of the past provided a release. Conclude by relating this situation to the theme of The Individual.

