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Literary Analysis Revised Mid-Term Exam

Literary Analysis: "Previous Condition"

> Now I was back from Chicago, busted, living off my friends in a dirty furnished room downtown. The show I had been with had folded in Chicago. It hadn't been much of a part—or much of a show either, to tell the truth. I played a kind of intellectual Uncle Tom, a young college student working for his race. The playwright had wanted to prove he was a liberal, I guess. But, as I say, the show had folded and here I was, back in New York and hating it. I knew that I should be getting another job, making the rounds, pounding the pavement. But I didn't. I couldn't face it. It was summer. I seemed to be fagged [tired] out. And every day I hated myself more. Acting's a rough life, even if you're white. I'm not tall and I'm not good looking and I can't sing or dance and I'm not white; so even at the best of times I wasn't in much demand.
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> --Baldwin, "Previous Condition," p.1

This passage from James Baldwin's "Previous Condition" is a first-person description of a young, broke, and depressed struggling actor's defeated return to New York after, "[t]he show [he] had been with had folded in Chicago." From Peter, the narrator's, perspective, he's come from a place of hard work and industry (Chicago), but also a place of personal failure to a place of dreams and opportunity (New York) but ended up worse off as he says "busted, living off my friends in a dirty furnished room downtown." He feels his blackness is a major handicap. In the Chicago show, he was given the role of "a kind of intellectual Uncle Tom, a young college student working for his race." He is deeply unhappy with himself for taking the expected, "approved" role, for being the stereotype. But at the same time, he needed to

support himself. Debasing himself in this way only deepens his depression which leads to later bad behaviour. Blackness is again a hindrance in his attempts to find new work, to engage in the "rough life" of acting. His self-loathing is palpable, the way he describes himself in purely negative terms, "I'm not tall and I'm not good looking and I can't sing or dance and I'm not white." He recalls the minstrel shows of old and even feels that he wouldn't be able to work in one of those because he "can't sing or dance."

The fact that he includes his skin colour in his list of failures, indirectly by saying, "I'm not white," shows us what he's feeling. By doing this, Baldwin is trying to put white readers in a place of personal gratitude for their race. Too, he is attempting to show the white audience the challenges faced by day-to-day black life. Simple things like renting and staying in a rented room, dining in a restaurant, and drinking in a bar are all made harder simply by being black and are all things that a white audience would take for granted and not even think about. Despite Baldwin being black, we can say he writes for a white audience as he associates traits like glamour and success with white life in contrast to black life.

All of these things that occur later in the story call back to this moment when Peter is simply in despair, trying to face going out into the day. Baldwin's description of Peter's depression is separate from his underlying self-hate. He obviously knows that he should "be getting another job, making the rounds, pounding the pavement," but he cannot bring himself to do so. He's "fagged out" and hating himself, so he justifies not looking for work by assuming he won't find any, that he "wasn't in much demand." Baldwin is pointing out the truth of black unemployability and how detrimental it can be to a person's psyche to feel this way. Peter is far from heroic. He's troubled, and introspective and is just a pawn for the white man to feel like "a liberal."

Consider even that Peter did not try to find work in Chicago but used whatever small savings he would have had to return to New York. He returned to where he had people. In shame rather than in triumph, but he returned nonetheless. It is telling, though, that he never considered taking on other work. He is

an actor, and acting is what he does. If he has to mooch off of his friends and struggle to find work and not find work and hate himself because of it, so be it. In this small way, Baldwin shows the white audience that, as beaten down and bedraggled as a black man may be, there's an underlying strength somewhere.

Baldwin uses this opening passage as the introduction, not only to the setting Peter is based in but also to the personal setting in Peter's mind. This provides insight into how his decision-making will be based on his personal values, beliefs and the cards he thinks he has been dealt.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. “Previous Condition: A Story.” Commentary, October 1948, www.commentary.org/articles/james-baldwin/previous-conditiona-story. Accessed 05 Nov 2022.