

About the Author

James Baldwin (1924–1987)



James Arthur Baldwin, a major American writer, produced a considerable body of work, including novels, essays, short stories, poetry, and plays. He was born and raised in Harlem. He began writing in high school and was editor of his school magazine. When he was fourteen, Baldwin was appointed youth minister at Fireside Pentecostal Assembly. Within a few years, he lost the desire to preach, but the oratorical style of that ministry found its way into his writings.

After graduating from high school in 1942, Baldwin wrote at night and supported himself by working at odd jobs during the day. With Richard Wright's assistance, he received a Eugene F. Saxton Fellowship in 1945. Prestigious magazines began accepting his essays and short stories. In 1948 he moved to Paris. Baldwin remained in Europe until 1957. During this period, his first and best-known novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, was published. This loosely autobiographical novel concerns a Harlem teenager's conflict with his repressive stepfather and the boy's religious conversion. Both of these experiences paralleled experiences in Baldwin's own life.

Notes of a Native Son, a collection of essays, appeared in 1955. Baldwin's national reputation as a writer and as a spokesperson for African American concerns was firmly established when his two books of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), were published. Literary critic Irving Howe once declared that



Gastaud/SIPA Press

Baldwin was one of "the two or three greatest essayists this country has ever produced."

Much of Baldwin's fiction is autobiographical. One of the major themes in Baldwin's fiction is black family life. The characters in "The Rockpile" also appear in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Before You Read

The Rockpile

Using What You Know

In the opening paragraphs of this story, you will read about children who are sitting on a *fire escape*, watching the street below. Many apartment houses in cities were once equipped with metal stairways attached to the outside of buildings. These structures provided tenants with a kind of terrace or tiny balcony. Have you seen such fire escapes? Where might you find illustrations to share with the class?

Literary Focus: Plot

The term **plot** refers to the sequence of related events that make up a story. Whatever the characters do or whatever happens to them forms the plot. Plot depends upon cause-and-effect relationships.

Conflict is generally the key element in plot. Conflict may take several forms. It may be **external** or **internal**. A plot may have more than one conflict, and there may be several conflicts related to one main conflict. The **climax** of a story is its high point or **turning point**. The story ends when there is a **resolution** of the major conflict and the outcome is clear.

As a plot progresses, the author may keep us in **suspense** about the course of events so that our interest is held. The author sometimes uses **foreshadowing** as a plot device, dropping hints about what is to come. An author will sometimes interrupt a narrative with a **flashback**, which tells about events that happened at an earlier time.

Setting a Purpose

As you read "The Rockpile," be aware of how events are related. Is there a clear cause-and-effect sequence? What are the major conflicts and where does the climax of the story occur?

The Rockpile

James Baldwin

Across the street from their house, in an empty lot between two houses, stood the rockpile. It was a strange place to find a mass of natural rock jutting out of the ground; and someone, probably Aunt Florence, had once told them that the rock was there and could not be taken away because without it the subway cars underground would fly apart, killing all the people. This, touching on some natural mystery concerning the surface and the center of the earth, was far too intriguing an explanation to be challenged, and it invested the rockpile, moreover, with such mysterious importance that Roy felt it to be his right, not to say his duty, to play there.

Other boys were to be seen there each afternoon after school and all day Saturday and Sunday. They fought on the rockpile. Sure footed, dangerous, and reckless, they rushed each other and grappled on the heights, sometimes disappearing down the other side in a confusion of dust and screams and up-ended, flying feet. "It's a wonder they don't kill themselves," their mother said, watching sometimes from the fire escape. "You children stay away from there, you hear me?" Though she said "children" she was looking at Roy, where he sat beside John on the fire escape. "The good Lord knows," she contin-



Constantine Manos/Magnum Photos



ued, "I don't want you to come home bleeding like a hog every day the Lord sends." Roy shifted impatiently, and continued to stare at the street, as though in this gazing he might somehow acquire wings. John said nothing. He had not really been spoken to: he was afraid of the rockpile and of the boys who played there.

Each Saturday morning John and Roy sat on the fire escape and watched the forbidden street below. Sometimes their mother sat in the room behind them, sewing, or dressing their younger sister, or nursing the baby, Paul. The sun fell across them and across the fire escape with a high, benevolent indifference; below them, men and women, and boys and girls, sinners all, loitered; sometimes one of the church-members passed and saw them and waved. Then, for the moment that they waved decorously back, they were intimidated. They watched the saint, man or woman, until he or she had disappeared from sight. The passage of one of the redeemed made them consider, however vacantly, the wickedness of the street, their own latent wickedness in sitting where they sat; and made them think of their father, who came home early on Saturdays and who would soon be turning this corner and entering the dark hall below them.

But until he came to end their freedom, they sat, watching and longing above the street. At the end of the street nearest their house was the bridge which spanned the Harlem River and led to a city called the Bronx;¹ which was where Aunt Florence lived. Nevertheless, when they saw her coming, she did not come from the bridge, but from the opposite end of the street. This,

1. *Harlem River . . . Bronx*: The Harlem River separates Manhattan Island from the Bronx, which is the only New York City borough connected to the mainland.

weakly, to their minds, she explained by saying that she had taken the subway, not wishing to walk, and that, besides, she did not live in *that* section of the Bronx. Knowing that the Bronx was across the river, they did not believe this story ever, but, adopting toward her their father's attitude, assumed that she had just left some sinful place which she dared not name, as, for example, a movie palace.

In the summertime boys swam in the river, diving off the wooden dock, or wading in from the garbage-heavy bank. Once a boy, whose name was Richard, drowned in the river. His mother had not known where he was; she had even come to their house, to ask if he was there. Then, in the evening, at six o'clock, they had heard from the street a woman screaming and wailing; and they ran to the windows and looked out. Down the street came the woman, Richard's mother, screaming, her face raised to the sky and tears running down her face. A woman walked beside her, trying to make her quiet and trying to hold her up. Behind them walked a man, Richard's father, with Richard's body in his arms. There were two white policemen walking in the gutter, who did not seem to know what should be done. Richard's father and Richard were wet, and Richard's body lay across his father's arms like a cotton baby. The woman's screaming filled all the street; cars slowed down and the people in the cars stared; people opened their windows and looked out and came rushing out of doors to stand in the gutter, watching. Then the small procession disappeared within the house which stood beside the rockpile. Then, "*Lord, Lord, Lord!*" cried Elizabeth, their mother, and slammed the window down.

One Saturday, an hour before his father

would be coming home, Roy was wounded on the rockpile and brought screaming upstairs. He and John had been sitting on the fire escape and their mother had gone into the kitchen to sip tea with Sister McCandless. By and by Roy became bored and sat beside John in restless silence; and John began drawing into his schoolbook a newspaper advertisement which featured a new electric locomotive. Some friends of Roy passed beneath the fire escape and called him. Roy began to fidget, yelling down to them through the bars. Then a silence fell. John looked up. Roy stood looking at him.

"I'm going downstairs," he said.

"You better stay where you is, boy. You know Mama don't want you going downstairs."

"I be right *back*. She won't even know I'm gone, less you run and tell her."

"I ain't *got* to tell her. What's going to stop her from coming in here and looking out the window?"

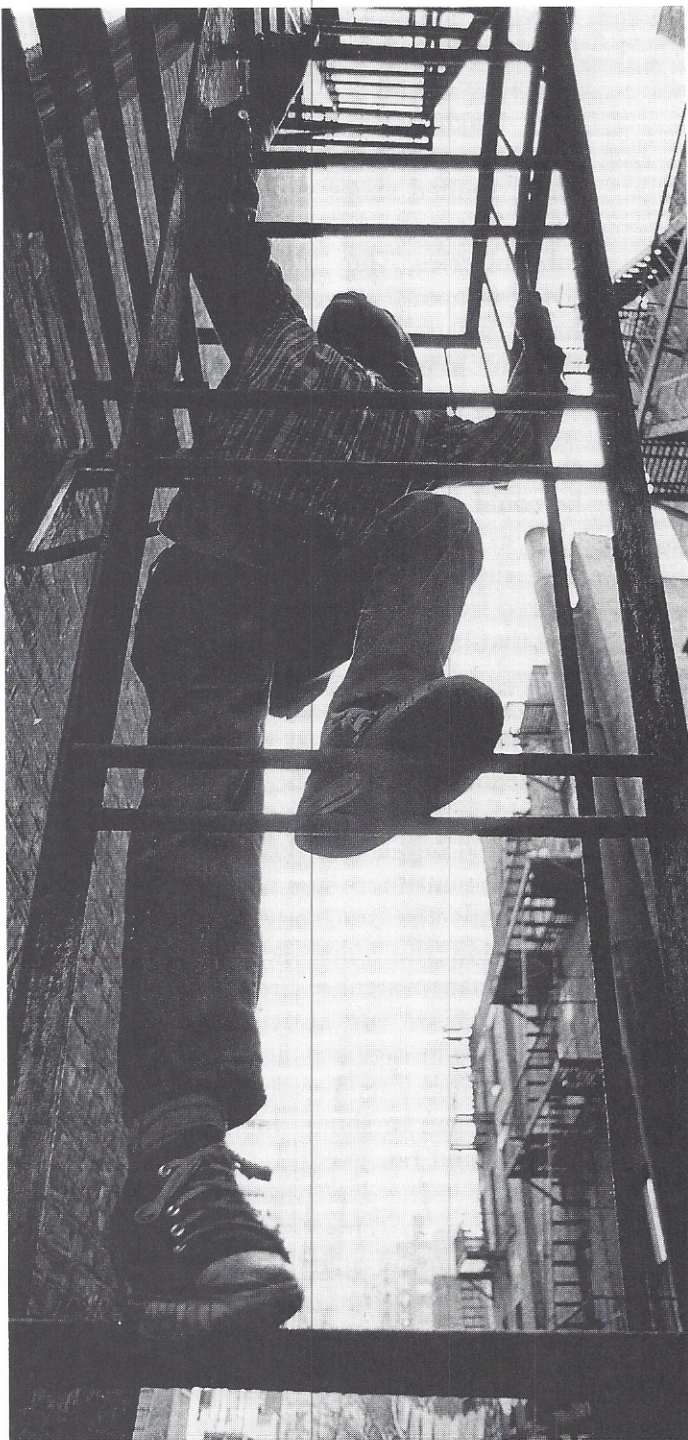
"She's talking," Roy said. He started into the house.

"But Daddy's going to be home soon!"

"I be back before *that*. What you all the time got to be so *scared* for?" He was already in the house and he now turned, leaning on the windowsill, to swear impatiently, "I be back in *five* minutes."

John watched him sourly as he carefully unlocked the door and disappeared. In a moment he saw him on the sidewalk with his friends. He did not dare to go and tell his mother that Roy had left the fire escape because he had practically promised not to. He started to shout, *Remember, you said five minutes!* but one of Roy's friends was looking up at the fire escape. John looked down at his schoolbook: he became engrossed again in the problem of the locomotive.

Bob Adelman/Magnum Photos



When he looked up again he did not know how much time had passed, but now there was a gang fight on the rockpile. Dozens of boys fought each other in the harsh sun: clambering up the rocks and battling hand to hand, scuffed shoes sliding on the slippery rock; filling the bright air with curses and jubilant cries. They filled the air, too, with flying weapons: stones, sticks, tin cans, garbage, whatever could be picked up and thrown. John watched in a kind of absent amazement—until he remembered that Roy was still downstairs, and that he was one of the boys on the rockpile. Then he was afraid; he could not see his brother among the figures in the sun; and he stood up, leaning over the fire-escape railing. Then Roy appeared from the other side of the rocks; John saw that his shirt was torn; he was laughing. He moved until he stood at the very top of the rockpile. Then, something, an empty tin can, flew out of the air and hit him on the forehead, just above the eye. Immediately, one side of Roy's face ran with blood, he fell and rolled on his face down the rocks. Then for a moment there was no movement at all, no sound, the sun, arrested,² lay on the street and the sidewalk and the arrested boys. Then someone screamed or shouted; boys began to run away, down the street, toward the bridge. The figure on the ground, having caught its breath and felt its own blood, began to shout. John cried, "Mama! Mama!" and ran inside.

"Don't fret, don't fret," panted Sister McCandless as they rushed down the dark, narrow, swaying stairs, "don't fret. Ain't a boy been born don't get his knocks every now and again. *Lord!*" they hurried into the sun. A man had picked Roy up and now

walked slowly toward them. One or two boys sat silent on their stoops; at either end of the street there was a group of boys watching. "He ain't hurt bad," the man said, "wouldn't be making this kind of noise if he was hurt real bad."

Elizabeth, trembling, reached out to take Roy, but Sister McCandless, bigger, calmer, took him from the man and threw him over her shoulder as she once might have handled a sack of cotton. "God bless you," she said to the man, "God bless you, son." Roy was still screaming. Elizabeth stood behind Sister McCandless to stare at his bloody face.

"It's just a flesh wound," the man kept saying, "just broke the skin, that's all." They were moving across the sidewalk, toward the house. John, not now afraid of the staring boys, looked toward the corner to see if his father was yet in sight.

Upstairs, they hushed Roy's crying. They bathed the blood away, to find, just above the left eyebrow, the jagged, superficial scar. "Lord, have mercy," murmured Elizabeth, "another inch and it would've been his eye." And she looked with apprehension toward the clock. "Ain't it the truth," said Sister McCandless, busy with bandages and iodine.

"When did he go downstairs?" his mother asked at last.

Sister McCandless now sat fanning herself in the easy chair, at the head of the sofa where Roy lay, bound and silent. She paused for a moment to look sharply at John. John stood near the window, holding the newspaper advertisement and the drawing he had done.

"We was sitting on the fire escape," he said. "Some boys he knew called him."

"When?"

"He said he'd be back in five minutes."

2. *arrested*: here used in the sense of halted motion.

“Why didn’t you tell me he was downstairs?”

He looked at his hands, clasping his notebook, and did not answer.

“Boy,” said Sister McCandless, “you hear your mother a-talking to you?”

He looked at his mother. He repeated:

“He said he’d be back in five minutes.”

“He said he’d be back in five minutes,” said Sister McCandless with scorn, “don’t look to me like that’s no right answer. You’s the man of the house, you supposed to look after your baby brothers and sisters—you ain’t supposed to let them run off and get half-killed. But I expect,” she added, rising from the chair, dropping the cardboard fan, “your Daddy’ll make you tell the truth. Your Ma’s way too soft with you.”

He did not look at her, but at the fan where it lay in the dark red, depressed seat where she had been. The fan advertised a pomade for the hair and showed a brown woman and her baby, both with glistening hair, smiling happily at each other.

“Honey,” said Sister McCandless, “I got to be moving along. Maybe I drop in later tonight. I don’t reckon you going to be at Tarry Service tonight?”

Tarry Service was the prayer meeting held every Saturday night at church to strengthen believers and prepare the church for the coming of the Holy Ghost on Sunday.

“I don’t reckon,” said Elizabeth. She stood up; she and Sister McCandless kissed each other on the cheek. “But you be sure to remember me in your prayers.”

“I surely will do that.” She paused, with her hand on the door knob, and looked down at Roy and laughed. “Poor little man,” she said, “reckon he’ll be content to sit on the fire escape *now*.”

Elizabeth laughed with her. “It sure ought

to be a lesson to him. You don’t reckon,” she asked nervously, still smiling, “he going to keep that scar, do you?”

“Lord, no,” said Sister McCandless, “ain’t nothing but a scratch. I declare, Sister Grimes, you worse than a child. Another couple of weeks and you won’t be able to *see* no scar. No, you go on about your housework, honey, and thank the Lord it weren’t no worse.” She opened the door; they heard the sound of feet on the stairs. “I expect that’s the Reverend,” said Sister McCandless, placidly, “I *bet* he going to raise cain.”³

“Maybe it’s Florence,” Elizabeth said. “Sometimes she get here about this time.” They stood in the doorway, staring, while the steps reached the landing below and began again climbing to their floor. “No,” said Elizabeth then, “that ain’t her walk. That’s Gabriel.”

“Well, I’ll just go on,” said Sister McCandless, “and kind of prepare his mind.” She pressed Elizabeth’s hand as she spoke and started into the hall, leaving the door behind her slightly ajar. Elizabeth turned slowly back into the room. Roy did not open his eyes, or move; but she knew that he was not sleeping; he wished to delay until the last possible moment any contact with his father. John put his newspaper and his notebook on the table and stood, leaning on the table, staring at her.

“It wasn’t my fault,” he said. “I couldn’t stop him from going downstairs.”

“No,” she said, “you ain’t got nothing to worry about. You just tell your Daddy the truth.”

He looked directly at her, and she turned to the window, staring into the street. What was Sister McCandless saying? Then from

3. *raise cain*: to make trouble (slang).

her bedroom she heard Delilah's thin wail and she turned, frowning, looking toward the bedroom and toward the still open door. She knew that John was watching her. Delilah continued to wail, she thought, angrily, *Now that girl's getting too big for that*, but she feared that Delilah would awaken Paul and she hurried into the bedroom. She tried to soothe Delilah back to sleep. Then she heard the front door open and close—too loud, Delilah raised her voice, with an exasperated sigh Elizabeth picked the child up. Her child and Gabriel's, her children and Gabriel's: Roy, Delilah, Paul. Only John was nameless and a stranger, living, unalterable testimony to his mother's days in sin.

"What happened?" Gabriel demanded. He stood, enormous, in the center of the room, his black lunchbox dangling from his hand, staring at the sofa where Roy lay. John stood just before him, it seemed to her astonished vision just below him, beneath his fist, his heavy shoe. The child stared at the man in fascination and terror—when a girl down home she had seen rabbits stand so paralyzed before the barking dog. She hurried past Gabriel to the sofa, feeling the weight of Delilah in her arms like the weight of a shield, and stood over Roy, saying:

"Now, ain't a thing to get upset about, Gabriel. This boy sneaked downstairs while I had my back turned and got hisself hurt a little. He's alright now."

Roy, as though in confirmation, now opened his eyes and looked gravely at his father. Gabriel dropped his lunchbox with a clatter and knelt by the sofa.

"How you feel, son? Tell your Daddy what happened?"

Roy opened his mouth to speak and then, relapsing into panic, began to cry. His father held him by the shoulder.

"You don't want to cry. You's Daddy's little man. Tell your Daddy what happened."

"He went downstairs," said Elizabeth, "where he didn't have no business to be, and got to fighting with them bad boys playing on that rockpile. That's what happened and it's a mercy it weren't nothing worse."

He looked up at her. "Can't you let this boy answer me for hisself?"

Ignoring this, she went on, more gently: "He got cut on the forehead, but it ain't nothing to worry about."

"You call a doctor? How you know it ain't nothing to worry about?"

"Is you got money to be throwing away on doctors? No, I ain't called no doctor. Ain't nothing wrong with my eyes that I can't tell whether he's hurt bad or not. He got a fright more'n anything else, and you ought to pray God it teaches him a lesson."

"You got a lot to say *now*," he said, "but I'll have *me* something to say in a minute. I'll be wanting to know when all this happened, what you was doing with your eyes *then*." He turned back to Roy, who had lain quietly sobbing eyes wide open and body held rigid: and who now, at his father's touch, remembered the height, the sharp, sliding rock beneath his feet, the sun, the explosion of the sun, his plunge into darkness and his salty blood; and recoiled, beginning to scream, as his father touched his forehead. "Hold still, hold still," crooned his father, shaking, "hold still. Don't cry. Daddy ain't going to hurt you, he just wants to see this bandage, see what they've done to his little man." But Roy continued to scream and would not be still and Gabriel dared not lift the bandage for fear of hurting him more. And he looked at Elizabeth in fury: "Can't you put that child down and help me with this boy? John, take your baby sister from



Boy Thinking, pen and ink wash by Oliver B. Johnson.

your mother—don't look like neither of you got good sense."

John took Delilah and sat down with her in the easy chair. His mother bent over Roy, and held him still, while his father, carefully—but still Roy screamed—lifted the bandage and stared at the wound. Roy's sobs began to lessen. Gabriel readjusted the bandage. "You see," said Elizabeth, finally, "he ain't nowhere near dead."

"It sure ain't your fault that he ain't dead." He and Elizabeth considered each other for a moment in silence. "He came mightily close to losing an eye. Course, his eyes ain't as big as your'n, so I reckon you don't think it matters so much." At this her face hardened; he smiled. "Lord, have mercy," he said, "you think you ever going to learn to do right? Where was you when all this happened? Who let him go downstairs?"

"Ain't nobody let him go downstairs, he just went. He got a head just like his father, it got to be broken before it'll bow. I was in the kitchen."

"Where was Johnnie?"

"He was in here."

"Where?"

"He was on the fire escape."

"Didn't he know Roy was downstairs?"

"I reckon."

"What you mean, you reckon? He ain't got your big eyes for nothing, does he?" He looked over at John. "Boy, you see your brother go downstairs?"

"Gabriel, ain't no sense in trying to blame Johnnie. You know right well if you have trouble making Roy behave, he ain't going to listen to his brother. He don't hardly listen to me."

"How come you didn't tell your mother Roy was downstairs?"

John said nothing, staring at the blanket which covered Delilah.

"Boy, you hear me? You want me to take a strap to you?"

"No, you ain't," she said. "You ain't going to take no strap to this boy, not today you ain't. Ain't a soul to blame for Roy's lying up there now but you—you because you done spoiled him so that he thinks he can do just anything and get away with it. I'm here to tell you that ain't no way to raise no child. You don't pray to the Lord to help you do better than you been doing, you going to live to shed bitter tears that the Lord didn't take his soul today." And she was trembling. She moved, unseeing, toward John and took Delilah from his arms. She looked back at Gabriel, who had risen, who stood near the sofa, staring at her. And she found in his face not fury alone, which would not have surprised her; but hatred so deep as to become insupportable in its lack of personality. His eyes were struck alive, unmoving, blind with malevolence—she felt, like the pull of the earth at her feet, his longing to witness her perdition.⁴ Again, as though it might be propitiation,⁵ she moved the child in her arms. And at this his eyes changed, he looked at Elizabeth, the mother of his children, the helpmeet given by the Lord. Then her eyes clouded; she moved to leave the room; her foot struck the lunchbox lying on the floor.

"John," she said, "pick up your father's lunchbox like a good boy."

She heard, behind her, his scrambling movement as he left the easy chair, the scrape and jangle of the lunchbox as he picked it up, bending his dark head near the toe of his father's heavy shoe.

4. **perdition** (pər-dīsh'ən): damnation.

5. **propitiation** (prō-pīsh'ē-ā'shən): an act that appeases.

Responding to the Selection

The Rockpile by James Baldwin

Identifying Facts

1. What is the rockpile?
2. How does Roy disobey his mother?
3. How is Roy injured?
4. Who tells the boys' father what happened?
5. Who is blamed for Roy's behavior?

Interpreting Meanings

1. How are the brothers contrasted? Why is Roy attracted to the rockpile? Why is John afraid of it?
2. We are told that the boys spend each Saturday morning sitting on the fire escape and watching the "forbidden street below." Why is the street "forbidden" to them? What dangers are there for children playing in the neighborhood?
3. Before Gabriel appears, his presence is clearly felt. How do you know that his children fear him?
4. Why is John unable to answer Gabriel's questions? How does Elizabeth try to protect John?
5. This story centers on the conflicts within a family. Roy's accident on the rockpile brings these conflicts to a head. What do you think is the major conflict in the story?
6. Reread the last sentence of the story. Why do you think the story ends with the image of the child's head bending over his father's shoe?

Literary Elements

Analyzing Conflict

Conflict is the struggle between two forces. A story can have several conflicts. These conflicts can be physical (the fight between the boys on the rockpile) or emotional (should John have told his mother that Roy had sneaked out of the house?). List the conflicts in "The Rockpile" that you would describe as emotional.

Developing Sentence Sense

Understanding Sentence Organization

Here is the opening sentence of Baldwin's story:

Across the street from their house, in an empty lot between two houses, stood the rockpile.

How does Baldwin organize the parts of his sentence to emphasize the rockpile? Suppose he had written this instead:

The rockpile stood across the street from their house, in an empty lot between two houses.

The information in both constructions is the same. What is lost in the second sentence?

Examine the following description of Gabriel:

He stood, enormous, in the center of the room, his black lunchbox dangling from his hand, staring at the sofa where Roy lay.

What makes this description of Gabriel ominous, or threatening? Suppose Baldwin had written this:

An enormous man, he stood in the center of the room with his lunchbox dangling from his hand. He was staring at the sofa where Roy lay.

Why is this description less effective?

Choose another sentence in the story and analyze the relationship of its parts. A good example is the last sentence in the story.

Writing About Literature

Analyzing a Title

Writers generally choose titles carefully. A title is an important clue not only to what the reader can expect, but also to what the work means.

Why do you think Baldwin calls his story "The Rockpile"? To answer this question, you need to determine what importance this object has in the story.

Prewriting Suggestions

Make a list of all references to the rockpile. For example, in the opening paragraph, Baldwin emphasizes its strangeness. Note that he uses the words *mystery*, *intriguing*, and *mysterious* to suggest that the rockpile has a **symbolic**, as well as a literal, meaning.

Note how the rockpile is important to the plot of the story. How does it help to define the contrasting characters of the brothers? How does the rockpile, huge and immovable, emphasize the helplessness of the characters?

Speaking and Listening

Identifying with a Character

Have you ever had to take care of a younger brother or sister or another child whose parents were away? What happened if the child did something against the family's rules? How did you handle the situation?

In light of your own experiences, was John right to keep quiet about his brother's disobedience? What might you have done in his place? Discuss your reaction to his decision with your classmates.