Module 7: Realism in the Family
Topic 5 Content: Realism in "The Rockpile"

Introduction

Click on each of the segments to explore elements of Realism within James Baldwin's short story "The Rockpile."

Regionalism

Realism in "The Rockpile"

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Having grown up himself in Harlem, Baldwin describes the urban setting of the story with common sights such as subway cars, fire escapes, and the "garbage-heavy bank" of the Harlem River. In addition, he also conveys a sense of danger in the streets of the community by mentioning the gang fights where boys battle "hand to hand."

Colloquialism

Treatment of Children

Condition of Women

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Colloquialism

"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."

The highlights of this passage reflect the verb tenses and slang typical of the time period's colloquial speech, which run counter to standard English. This gives the dialogue an authentic flavor.

Image Caption: Children play leap frog in Harlem, 1930.

Treatment of Children

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.

The author leaves the ending ambiguous as to whether or not Gabriel kicks John when he bends his head near his father's "heavy shoe," but the tone without a doubt is one of fear, reflecting the physical abuse and mistreatment that John must endure for being the illegitimate son.

Condition of Women

And she looked with apprehension toward the clock.

After Roy is injured and brought back into the home to be treated, his mother Elizabeth looks apprehensively at the clock. The reader knows that the incident occurred shortly before Gabriel is to return home. Elizabeth's nervous anticipation reveals the strained relationship between her and Gabriel. Rather than being considered an equal, Elizabeth is subordinate to the dominant Gabriel, who frequently treats her condescendingly.