ONE VERY OLD WOMAN seemed to peek from every door. Toothless, blue-black, her shy grin looked mischievous, a small head wrapped in the brightest kerchief. At some doorways, her hands might be coated with flour. At others she held a broom or some white man’s half-ironed white business shirt. She wore male work boots four sizes too large, the toes curled up like elf shoes. Sometimes she smoked a pipe (this was in the Forties). Her long skirt dragged the floor, pulling along string, dustballs. She asked, “What they want now. You ain’t the one from before – you a young one, ain’t you?” and she chuckled at me. I smiled and swallowed.¹

... One month into the job, nobody knew my name. I’d stayed “Assurance.” And my clients still looked pretty much alike to me. Maybe it sounds bad but, hey, they were alike. People started having names when I deciphered the last collector’s rotten handwriting. One morning, it yielded like a busted code. Then the ladies began standing out from one another. Oh, man, I couldn’t believe some of the tallies!

“Vesta Lotte Battle, 14 Sunflower Street – commenced payment on policy #1, Mar. 2, 1912, four policies complete, collected to date: $4,360.50.”²

... My ninth week on the job, all clients permanently broke down into themselves. There was the one missing two fingers, the one who always tried to give me geranium clippings for my mom, the plump one in the bed, the pretty young one in the wicker wheelchair, the old one in her metal wheelchair who wore a cowgirl hat, the one with the wig, the one who told the same three easy riddles each week, the one, the one.

... My rounds sure felt easier when people had the decency to stay blended. Now I started worrying over payer and nonpayers too. You know how it is, once a crowd splits into separate faces, nothing can ever mash them back into that first safe shape.³
MORAL LEADER

**BLESSED ASSURANCE: THEMES AND QUESTIONS**

**Moral awareness**

We generally assume that we will recognize a moral challenge when we are faced with one. We hope that the boundaries will be evident and the choices to make are obvious. But privately we may wonder: Will we really know? What is it that we will perceive and see? What will alert us that this is a situation we should pay attention to? What should we do in response? These are central issues that characters, most notably the protagonist, Jerry, confront in *Blessed Assurance*.

*Blessed Assurance: A Moral Tale*, which concludes Allan Gurganus’ collection of stories, *White People*, introduces a narrator, Jerry, whom we listen to as an adult who’s recounting a pivotal experience in his youth (around 1950 in a southern US state). Jerry tells us that a summer job he held at the age of nineteen – regularly collecting literally nickels and dimes from African-American citizens that would eventually pay for their funerals – was unforgettable. As an adult forty years later, he remains haunted by those events and the people he encountered, but he does not tell us precisely why. Indeed, he suggests that he himself does not know why this long-ago episode continues to be so important to him. And yet it was clearly a moral challenge to him, even if he cannot pinpoint it or articulate its boundaries – or determine whether he did the right thing.

For a long time it is not even clear to Jerry that he faced a moral challenge. We watch him as he struggles to master his new job, and we are given a rare opportunity to try to identify the point at which an individual’s perception of their situation changes – the point at which they are first struck by moral awareness. Jerry’s struggles can provide provisional answers to commonsense questions that relate to our own lives: What does this moment of moral awareness look like? Do we know it at the time, or only afterwards? Most importantly, in what ways does moral awareness affect us? Does moral insight make our lives easier? Or harder?

**A moral dilemma**

We will find that, even after Jerry appears to have a new view of his situation, the road to action for him is by no means clear. In fact, Jerry faces a situation with competing obligations and choices that seem to contradict each other. As readers we witness how Jerry attempts to sort through the conflicts inherent in his situation and the decisions he eventually did make (and didn’t make) – in both his youth and maturity. Through Jerry’s decisions we can explore what action in the face of a moral dilemma looks like. A moral dilemma is a type of right versus right challenge that is irreconcilable. What happens when we aspire to fulfill mutually exclusive moral obligations and duties? What should we do in this circumstance? And, because we know we face internal conflict, what should we expect and how will we feel?
Future impact of moral decisions

Jerry’s story is also a retrospective narrative – a telling of early events from the vantage point of forty years of intervening life and history. But his story is not just about the past. We often wonder whether the actions we take today will affect us in the future. How long is the shadow that moral decisions cast into the future? Jerry’s story allows us to begin to answer this question, to lay out the stakes of decision-making so we can appreciate the risks and impact of our actions beyond, possibly well beyond, the time frame of the immediate moment.

ASSIGNMENT


1. How do you assess the business model used by Windlass Funerary Eventualities, Inc., the insurance company Jerry worked for?

2. How would you describe Mrs. Battle’s character?

3. What is the nature of her and Jerry’s relationship?

4. Do you agree with all of the actions Jerry took? Why? Why not?

5. Jerry looks back on his early decisions with regret. Review the shape that Jerry’s life has taken, and then be prepared to weigh in on this argument, by agreeing, or mounting a defense of the ways in which Jerry might have been changed, for the better, by his actions.

BLESSED ASSURANCE: BACKGROUND

Blessed Assurance takes place in the American South in the late 1940s. It describes relationships between Jerry, its 19-year-old white protagonist, and the African-American residents of “Baby Africa,” as the part of town that they live in was called. You may want to know more about the life and times it depicts. Background materials here will provide you with a deeper understanding of the story’s context. They include a brief history of race relations in the United States, a description of society and culture in the American South, and, because the story has at its center a business built on weekly saving for a funeral, religious practices in the region among African-Americans and Southern whites.
Race relations in the United States: A brief overview

Slavery prior to the Civil War

In 1776, when America’s Declaration of Independence was signed, there were an estimated 500,000 Africans held in slavery within the original thirteen colonies, a majority of whom lived in the southern states of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, as well as in the “border states” of Maryland and Delaware. In the South, slaves made up an estimated 40 percent of the population, and, in the view of many (but certainly not all) Southern and Northern whites, were necessary for the economic well-being of the Colonies.4

The Constitutional Convention of 1787, which drafted a permanent constitution uniting the thirteen former colonies, averted an early conflict over the role of slavery in the Union by enshrining within it a compromise on the issue based on notions of property. For purposes of representation and taxation, slaves were to be counted as three-fifths of a person. The slave trade was to continue at least until 1808, when Congress could abolish it (and at which time it overwhelmingly did).5 In return for agreeing to return fugitive slaves, Northern states received concessions in trade and commerce. Through these compromises, an early crisis was averted, but at a price: Southern states continued to view slavery as a right of individual states, which intertwined the issue of slavery with an even larger and in some ways more divisive question: Was there to be a strong federal government with broad powers, or was America to be a union of relatively independent states?

The Civil War and reconstruction

The physical and economic expansion of the United States created new tensions over slavery and “States’ Rights” for which the constitutional compromises in themselves proved inadequate. New compromises, commonly over the designated territories to which slavery could spread, were reached throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, although these took the form of temporary resolutions rather than permanent solutions. The efforts at compromise were severely hindered by the Supreme Court’s decision in the Dred Scott case (1857), which ruled territorial compromises to be unconstitutional: Slavery was to be allowed in all United States territories, and blacks – even those who were free – could not be citizens of the United States.

The Civil War (1861–1865), fought between the North and the breakaway Southern slaveholding states from Texas to Virginia, was the culmination of tensions over States’ Rights, in which the issue of slavery played a key role. With President Abraham Lincoln’s “Emancipation Proclamation” (1863) the war increasingly became a moral imperative to abolish slavery as an institution, once and for all.

Consequently, when the North emerged victorious, efforts at “reconstruction” focused not only on reintegrating the South into the Union, but also on reconstituting the political, economic, and social framework on which Southern slaveholding society had been based. New constitutional amendments outlawed
slavery and sought to guarantee the civil and political rights of African-Americans, while the military occupation of the South installed African-Americans in high positions of power such as Senators and Representatives, and even, in the case of Louisiana, a Governor. Meanwhile, Southern resentment – although by no means monolithic – festered over what was seen as a harsh Northern “imperial” rule, and the overturning of Southern society. Violent racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, ostensibly seeking to reclaim a Southern way of life, began to gather strength.

**Segregation and the Jim Crow laws**

As the Southern states were reintegrating into the Union, the gains of Reconstruction were increasingly reversed. The so-called Jim Crow laws, named after a popular stage depiction of an uneducated rural black man, were passed across the South, limiting the political involvement of African-Americans, relegating them to second-class citizens in the social sphere, and segregating them from white education, which in effect limited their possibilities for advancement. Segregation was upheld numerous times by the Supreme Court, which ruled in 1896 that segregation did not violate equality – African-Americans could be “separate but equal.” Segregation was not overturned by the Supreme Court until the 1950s, and strong legislation arising from the Civil Rights movement did not take effect until a decade later.

**Society and culture in the American South**

**Post-reconstruction**

Southern blacks and whites after the Civil War had both largely become sharecroppers, agricultural tenants on the property of a landlord with whom they shared their crops. Blacks were commonly restricted to this arrangement during and after Reconstruction because of institutional and racist measures aimed at tying them to the land, while whites increasingly turned to sharecropping because of the sharp economic decline in agriculture and in the profitability of cotton, the principal crop of the American South. Many white and black communities came to participate in a common way of rural life, dedicated to church, the community store, and the crop cycle. The Jim Crow laws and segregation were in many cases the only arrangement that kept whites – often equally destitute and having no better education for their own children – a step ahead of blacks on the socioeconomic ladder.

**Mechanization and urbanization**

From the 1920s onwards, and gaining momentum through the 1940s, the mechanization of agriculture increasingly undermined the economic rationale of sharecropping, and sharecroppers were ultimately even encouraged to move off the land by the larger plantation owners. Both whites and African-Americans moved internally within the South to newly urbanized areas. Urbanization began as a gradual process, originating with mechanization and the growth of mill towns,
and accelerated in response to World War II (1939–1945), during and after which cities in the South grew three times as fast as comparable cities in the North.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Societal effects}

In the perception of some (but not all) Southern whites, a way of life was being lost during the first decades of the twentieth century, and especially after World War II. Even though jobs were plentiful in mill towns and in the new industries brought by the war, the profound economic and demographic shifts in this traditionally agrarian society “moved many politicians and writers to build, or build upon, a tradition of deep and encompassing cultural nostalgia that supplanted any engagement with ongoing cultural change or racial equality.”\textsuperscript{11} Race relations in newly urbanized areas, uncharted territory for most whites and blacks alike, were defined by Jim Crow laws, especially in places where races were bound to rub shoulders such as public transportation, public facilities, and restaurants.

Over time, Southern regions of the United States became increasingly economically isolated from the rest of the country. After World War II, in America’s post-war and post-Depression economic boom, the relative socioeconomic backwardness of the South could no longer be overlooked, especially when influential African-American leaders in the North, bolstered by black participation in the war, increasingly agitated for change. Court decisions and executive orders from the federal government, which were slowly chipping away at the edifice of segregation, spurred many nostalgic and alarmist Southern whites into violent racial confrontations. Lynch mobs and organized white militias like the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council had become an important influence in the South, even if they weren’t necessarily representative of the majority of white Southerners’ desires.

\textit{The “Great Black Migration” and Southern black communities}

Economic changes set in motion by the gradual obsolescence of sharecropping following World War II resulted in the “Great Black Migration,” then the largest internal migration in American history, which saw a steady stream of five million African-Americans between 1940 and 1970\textsuperscript{12} seeking employment in Northern cities such as Detroit, Chicago, and New York. There, the promise of gainful employment, upward mobility, and a somewhat less segregated society proved highly attractive.

The great migration North also had the effect of sorely testing family and community bonds in African-American society, and those who remained in the South often faced a hand-to-mouth existence in communities (like Gurganus’ “Baby Africa” of \textit{Blessed Assurance}) that were usually situated adjacent to, yet segregated from, white towns and cities. Prospects for advancement were extremely limited. The few residents with education could teach in the black school systems, preach in local churches, or operate small businesses within local communities; the majority, without education or opportunity to broach larger spheres of economic possibilities, could often only find work as domestic servants for white households, or as day
laborers on existing agricultural “plantations.” These black townships often lacked the benefits and bare necessities found in the nearby white communities such as clean water, sewers, and electricity.

**Payment on installment**

In such communities, where residents had virtually no capital and no credit, a common method of purchasing expensive goods and services was paying in small weekly installments. These payments, as well as the company employees who collected them, were not unusual across America, especially in poorer areas – both white and black – where many, using this method, were able to buy otherwise prohibitively expensive consumer goods. Property, automobiles, furniture, and encyclopedias, among many other products, could be purchased “on the installment plan.”

**Religious practice in the American South**

**The hereafter**

The American South was, and still is, a deeply Protestant Christian society, and this defining characteristic has been shared by both black and white communities. The notion of personal redemption, a cornerstone of Christian practice and theology, has been a particularly strong theme in Southern churches, black and white alike.

While sharing in this religious milieu, African-Americans also established their own religious identity based on cultural heritage, segregation of church services, and class differences. The result has generally been a more emotionally expressive, interactive religious service, which, although possibly having roots in West African tradition, was also originally a means of empowerment. “Shouting is about identity. Shouting is about power. It is about expressing that which, for so long, one could not without the threat of severe punishment.” Not only was emotional expressiveness a means of empowerment vis-à-vis society, but it was also an expression of conviction about an anticipated spiritual redemption.

Such manifestation was an attitude towards religious practice that white society – mostly its upper crust – found to be highly unusual, despite the religious values they had in common. Nevertheless, the notion of a “Great Hereafter,” shared by many Christians, regardless of color or origin, created an affinity for a devotion to salvation that would come in another life.

**African-American funerals: “Homegoings”**

African-American funerals also were – and to a lesser extent continue to be – distinct. Originally, slaveholders left funeral services almost entirely to the slaves themselves, and for this reason there are continuities between black funeral services and West African funerary rituals. African-American funerals were not only distinct in their origin, but also, because of the experience of slavery, noted for their spiritual orientation referring to “home.”
Death was “Goin’ home,” and consequently, unlike white funerals, which often were restrained, reserved, and mournful, black funerals were hopeful, celebratory, and occasions where joyful and spontaneous displays of emotion were expected. W. E. B. DuBois, a highly influential black activist and scholar at the turn of the twentieth century, observed the spiritual and redeeming elements in Southern black funerals. “Losing the joy of this world,” he wrote, Southern African-Americans “eagerly seized upon the offered conceptions of the next,” since they lived a life “under sorrow and tribulation until the Great Day when He should lead His dark children home.”

An individual could commonly be expected to plan his or her funeral well in advance, hoping for the most uplifting send-off possible. In the twentieth century, the first successful business people in Southern black society, men and women alike, were owners of funeral homes, who were afforded great respect as pillars of the community. Not only did they provide funerals, a service which white funeral homes were typically unwilling to offer to black citizens; they also offered insurance, counseling, and even investment advice. These funeral homes continued the efforts of nineteenth-century burial associations, which allowed individuals to pay a weekly fee of several pennies for the cost of their funeral to be covered completely, guaranteeing that they would be “put away nicely.”

**BACKGROUND BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING**


An overview of the politics, society, and race issues which defined the American South.


Written in 1903 by a leading African-American proponent of civil and political rights, this survey provides an excellent depiction of African-Americans at the turn of the century.


A collection of anthropological and historical essays covering a broad range of topics, including family, the rural economy, and religion.


An attempt to uncover the underlying cultural and intellectual milieu of the American South during this decade.


Analyzes the origins of the Great Black Migration, as well as the political, social, economic, and even personal changes that accompanied it.


A scholarly yet accessible anthropological and historical examination of African-American funerary practices.


An analytical assessment of slavery itself as well as the historiography of slavery in America.
ALLAN GURGANUS: BIOGRAPHY

Allan Gurganus, a white American, was born in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in 1947.17 “It was the kind of town where if I was misbehaving on the street, people I had never met before would come up and say, ‘You have the Gurganus nose, and I know exactly who your grandparents are, and they would be ashamed of your setting off firecrackers, and put that down this instant.’ And we obeyed.”18 His mother was a schoolteacher, and, in his own words, his “father’s family were landowners, farmer-merchants . . . It was also a very religious family.”

A conscientious objector to the Vietnam War – an untenable position in his conservative hometown – Gurganus was eventually forced to enlist in the war effort when he was 18. He chose to join the Navy, where, by his own estimate, he read 1,200 books aboard the USS Yorktown, and authored countless letters home for many of his shipmates. He spent three years in the Navy. In a 1989 interview with The New York Times, Gurganus emphasized that his experience in Vietnam helped shape his view of race relations in the South:

There were people in the town with our name who were black people, but I somehow never made the connection until one day I saw this 18th-century document listing the number of slaves who had been owned by people with my own name. I made a connection between the slaves and my own circumstances, because I had been drafted against my will to fight in Vietnam. And the helplessness of the slaves and the despair of being corralled and being shipped by boat to a territory I didn’t feel I belonged in to do work for people I had no respect for, made me feel a tremendous identification with the slaves that my great-grandparents had owned.19

After leaving the Navy, Gurganus turned to writing, and graduated from Sarah Lawrence College. He studied under the well-known American writers Stanley Elkin and John Cheever, and achieved his first major success at the age of twenty-six when he had a short story published in The New Yorker, a high achievement for a writer of any age.


Besides writing, Gurganus has also taught at Stanford University, Duke University, Sarah Lawrence College, and the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

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NOTES

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7 Ibid., p. 7.
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12 Ibid., pp. 20–21.
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