

**Being Black and Religious: The Search for Self Realization
in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain***

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Abstract

James Baldwin's novels present the protagonist's search for identity in a complicated, confused and disappointing social background. His Characters are black Americans constrained and convoluted by the existing systems of America. James Baldwin's rich intellectual journey illustrates the direction of black American thought and culture in the late twentieth century. His novels and essays have had a stunning impact on American life and opened up new ways to understand contemporary societal problems. He presents the fierce and polemical black American life and exposes the innumerable overtones and undertones of interracial relations. A fundamental idea in Baldwin's vision has always been that of a black man as a victim of history. He expresses the wishes, thoughts and experiences of thousands of blacks, their sorrow and strain, despair, aspiration and hatred. This research article looks into how the religion and society blocks the desires of an young black American in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

Baldwin has been an outspoken activist in the struggle for social, economic, and political justice for the black minority in American society and is indeed a mediator between the whites and the blacks, by explaining and translating the black man's experiences into American terms and by establishing his own struggle for identity with that of the American. Fred L. Standley writes, "Baldwin has repeatedly insisted on the parallel between the Negro in search of selfhood and the American intent of distilling a national identity" (99).

Baldwin's fictional works show an increasing and painful awareness of the problems inherent in the quest for personal and artistic identity. The crises in Baldwin's life, most often communicated in his works as artistic, religious and sexual, have given rise to a single

mindful dedication in search of discovery of the self. Baldwin in his works demonstrates the burden of being black and bisexual in an American cultural environment. His novels evoke the reader to the distinctiveness of black life in American life and deal with the impact of the conditions of urban life and society on black people. "He treats not the rural and natural setting but the grime and the gutter, the anonymity and impersonality, the confinement and isolation indigenous to the modern metropolis, especially its impact upon those within the lower economic stratum" (Standley 50). His novels portray the world of the black Americans in its diversity and richness, not as a mere spectre of protest, but as a living culture of men and women who even when deprived, share in the emotions and desires of common humanity.

Baldwin's vision has been substantially shaped by his private anguish as a mistreated stepson, black and homosexual. His vision is a product of his own struggle to define the chaos of his experience to achieve an orderly sense of self. In the depths of despair he has forged his own identity, and through his novels he has helped blacks to shape their own identities. His novels portray the black American in search of the eternal, elusive identity. "The theme of identity is the most pervasive one in his work and involves the major issues of race, nationality, sexuality, art and morality" (Standley 20). The search of self-identity is one of Baldwin's central themes. The quest for identity is a serious problem in America and the failure to undergo the experience is indicative of a fatal weakness which destroys a person. The quest for identity always involves the discovery and rejection of illusion and delusion about oneself. Almost all Baldwin's protagonists from John in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* to Fonny in *If Beale Street Could Talk* are involved in an agonizing quest for identity. They always seem groping from an immense loneliness, carrying on an unarticulated search. They struggle to define and maintain their black identity within America's alienating and entangling cultural landscapes of racism and discrimination. They are highly self-conscious, reflecting not only upon their social situation but on the nature of their consciousness itself. Fred L Standley says,

they are all of like sensibility- they share the possibilities of a distinct heroic mode. They are blue's boys; they must become blue's men. The struggle to achieve blues manhood engages the union of sacred and secular, of mind and feeling, of lore and fact, of the technical and of the spiritual, of boogie and

strut, of street and manor, of bed and bread. The struggle demands the abyss; the achievement commands the mountain. (218)

A genuine sense of self and an identity depending largely on self- knowledge and self-awareness come only through suffering. Characters' colour inflicts suffering on them, suffering that can be uplifting and humanizing. But this self-discovery is never an entirely private battle. It is also not always the result of private anguish and loving commitment to another individual. In Baldwin's view there can be no self- perception apart from interpersonal relationships. In order to define oneself, a person has to be willing to reveal his interior being to someone to share his agonies and experiences. Identity can be achieved only in a spiritual communion with others. It is dependent on identification of the individual self with group self, with group experience and tradition. Tradition or heritage is indispensable to achieve self- discovery. Community plays a crucial role in Baldwin's novels. Often his characters quest for identity reveals their need for communal identification. Baldwin suggests that one can achieve a genuine and liberated sense of self only through complete acceptance of one's self, through loving commitment to another and through genuine relationship with one's community. His novels present the vital relationship between the self, the other and the community.

Go Tell It on the Mountain is essentially an exorcism, purgation, a necessary constriction which leads to the unlimited expanses of identity. The novel stands as an honest, intensive self- analysis functioning simultaneously to illuminate self, society and mankind as a whole. It is a story by a black, about blacks, set in a predominantly black environment. It is an authentic and convincing presentation of a wide range of experience from the days of slavery in the South to the Harlem of Baldwin's youth. The major conflict of the novel is the universal problem of youth achieving maturity. John Grimes' search for himself is seen as cutting the psychological umbilical cord. The central action of the novel is John's initiation into manhood- a ritual symbolization of the psychological step from dependence to a sense of self. It is highly autobiographical and focuses upon the religious conversion of John Grimes on his fourteenth birthday in Harlem's storefront church, The Temple of the Fire Baptized. Novel represents John's search for roots, surrender to tradition, and an acceptance of his racial past.

Go Tell It on the Mountain is seen as Baldwin's obsessive preoccupation with his own private world of oppression and rejection and the story reflects his own life as a black young

man chained to a world of discipline and tradition. John Grimes wishes to escape the dogmatically religious boundaries of his father's house. Using the fictional character John as a surrogate, Baldwin perceptively probes into his own frustrations and the shortcomings of his family and the struggle for identity, i.e., purpose for functional being, is the major issue here. The novel presents three generations of a black family whose life extends from slavery to the present day. It investigates the black's possibility of achieving identity through the discipline of Christianity. Robert A. Bone says that the novel "cuts through the walls of the store-front church to the essence of Negro experience in America" (31). Baldwin analyzes the spiritual dilemma of black Americans. From the quest for identity, John Grimes escapes into the ostensible safety of religious ecstasy. As he lies before the altar, a series of visionary states pass through his soul. Images of darkness and chaos, silence and emptiness, mist and cold trouble his mind at maximum intensity. These images of damnation express the state of the soul when thrust into outer darkness by rejecting, punishing, castrating father figure who is a surrogate of a white society. The dominant emotions are shame, despair, guilt and fear. John's fate will necessarily be complex as the music he hears throughout the novel.

This sound had filled John's life, so it now seemed, from the moment he had first drawn breath. He had heard it everywhere, in prayer and in daily speech, and where ever the saints were gathered, and in the unbelieving streets. It was in his father's anger, and in mother's calm insistence, and in the vehement mockery of his aunt; it had rung, so oddly, in Roy's voice this afternoon, and when Elisha played the piano it was there; it was in the beat and jangle of Sister McCandless's tambourine, it was in the very cadence of her testimony, and invested that testimony with a matchless, unimpeachable authority. Yes he had heard it all of his life, but it was only now that his ears were opened to this sound that came from darkness... it rose from his bleeding, his cracked- open heart. It was a sound of rage and weeping which filled the grave, rage and weeping from time set free, but bound now in eternity; rage that had no language, weeping with no voice- which yet spoke now, to John's startled soul, of boundless melancholy, of bitterest patience, and the longest night.
(*GTM* 194-195)

The matchless, unimpeachable authority John hears is the sound of the souls of black folk. It is the sound of black art and all black religion, for it flows from the frustrated and

disappointed hearts. This is the sound of the blues. John attempts to achieve with 'wild uneasiness' his individual existence, the complex fate of the group the sound represents. This inescapable web frustrates his individual will. On these harsh realities John discovers his identity. He is the lowest among the lowly. He belongs to those armies of darkness and must forever share their pain. He struggles to flee away from this darkness, out of his black community, but eventually "moaned and stumbled, and crawled through darkness, finding no hard, no voice, finding no door" (*GTM* 195). He shares the complex and ambivalent fate of black Americans,

the despised and rejected, the wretched and the spat upon, the earth's off scouring; and he was in their company, they would swallow up his soul. The stripes they had endured would scar his back, their punishment would be his, his their humiliation, anguish, chains, their dungeon his, their death his. (*GTM* 195)

John is an artist troubled by his religious heritage. He has an inchoate artistic sensibility and yearns to experience the bliss of the common place, though his precocious power of perception and intelligence distinguishes him among his peers. Through a series of scenes occurring on his fourteenth birthday, the conflicts of young John is presented. On his fourteenth birthday, John wakes up with a sense of guilt. He has committed a sin of the flesh which has put him in a dilemma. He has already been severely confused of his adolescent homosexual longings. He stands upon a hill in New York's Central Park and feels "like a giant who might crumble this city with anger... like a tyrant who might crush this city with his heel... like a long awaited conqueror at whose feet flowers would be strewn, and before whom multitudes cried, Hosanna!" (*GTM* 31). He hates the rewards to be inherited from his preacher father and tries to escape the miseries inherent in the life of black Harlem which is controlled by the white power.

But he did not long for the narrow way, where all his people walked, where the houses did not rise, piercing, as it seemed, the unchanging clouds, but huddled, flat, ignoble, close to the fifthly ground, where the streets and the hallways and the rooms were dark and where the unconquerable odor was of dust and sweet, and urine, and homemade gin. In the narrow way, the way of the cross, there awaited him, only humiliation forever; there awaited him, one day, a house like his father's house and a church like his father's, and a job

like his father's where he would grow old and black with hunger and toil.
(*GTM* 32)

So the ugliness poverty and miserable surroundings of his father's house compels him to move out to a new world "where he would eat good food and wear fine clothes and go to the movies as often as he wished" (*GTM* 31). In *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* George Kent observes,

Mixed with his vision and perverting it is John's guilt over his sexual drives, the religious concept of the city as evil and the fatal tempter of the soul, and his parent's feeling that the city (New York) is filled with antagonistic whites who will block the worldly aspirations of Negroes. Over such obstacles John Peers, enveloped in a solitude that seems well-nigh unbreakable (142).

The novel is a powerful presentation of John's dilemma, a young man rendered impotent, except in his dreams by the pervasiveness of the triadic threat to his existence, i.e. God, Gabriel and the white man. His terror, his fear and hatred of God, is analogous to his fear and hatred of white society. John hates and fears his earthly father, Gabriel with the same intensity with which he hates and fears God and society. John is filled with guilt, hatred, fear, love amidst the stern, religious frustrations of his father. Fred L Standley says, "He (John) is obsessed with the fear of his father's domination, troubled by the awareness of his sexual maturity, reluctant to leave his mother's protection, and feeling the pressure from all sides urging him to take his stand among the adults of the church community in which he lives" (170). John imagines that he has special power to overcome the persecutions of his father and white society and to emerge as a victor:

He had in himself a power that other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself, to raise himself, and that, perhaps with this power he might one day win that love which he so longed for. This was not in John, a faith subject to death or alteration, nor yet a hope subject to death or alteration; nor yet a hope subject to destruction; it was his identity. (*GTM* 18)

John's life and consciousness evolves through the lives of his father Gabriel, aunt Florence and mother Elizabeth. In order to preserve his image as the Lord's anointed, Gabriel has sacrificed the lives of those around him. His principal victim is John, who is not his natural son. For Gabriel, John "is the son of a bond woman" (*GTM* 43).

Gabriel's existence can only be described as lustful and selfish. He has become involved within three 'fallen women', always for the purpose of satisfying his own egotistical desires. Gabriel marries Deborah because he fancies himself to be her divinely appointed saviour sent "to raise her up, to release her from that dishonour which was hers in the eyes of men" (*GTM* 109). In turn Deborah would give him the son to continue his 'royal' line. But there has been barrenness and no heir comes forth. This unproductiveness of the marital bed is symbolic of the sterility of the conjugal relationship that existed between Gabriel and Deborah. Louis H Pratt says, "Deborah becomes a millstone hung about Gabriel's neck, a burden to be borne in the heat of the day" (53). It symbolizes the breakdown of communication between the sexes and the failure of their relationship to attain mutuality and rejects the possibility of identity development for both partners. Gabriel preaches his sermons, makes love to prostitutes, and marries women- all for the convenience of the moment. "He is incapable of pursuing his own quest for identity as he is assisting these women in discovering theirs because he has lost touch with humanity" (Pratt 54).

Gabriel fails to establish a genuine relationship with his two sons. He is incapable of these things because love has never become a reality in his life. Therefore to Gabriel, John's conversion is a bitter irony: "only the son of the bondwoman stood where the rightful heir should stand" (*GTM* 128). Gabriel's phrase echoes with the words in the book of Genesis in Bible: "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (Gen.21. 9-10). Gabriel and John have a metaphorical relation to Abraham and Ishmael, Hagar's son. This tableau of guilty father and rejected son represents race relations in America. The black in America is literally the bastard child of American civilization. John, the innocent victim of hatred, is the archetypal image of a black American child. Through John, Baldwin reiterates the essence of black experience as rejection and makes shame, the most destructive consequence of rejection. John's life is an endless struggle with little recovery. John has to bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father, the symbol of white's subjugation and oppression. He wants to flee from his father. "He had encountered in the jungle some evil beast crouching, and ravenous, with eyes like Hell unclosed, and exactly as though on a road's turning, he found himself staring at certain distraction, he found that he

could not move” (*GTM* 46). Gabriel does not look at his own evil with remorse. His behavior towards John resembles the white man’s relation to the black in a racist society.

In order to safeguard the good opinion of himself, Gabriel keeps his wickedness at a distance and repudiates it by attributing it to others. Gabriel’s psychological mechanisms are that of white man. Robert A. Bone observes:

Throughout his work Baldwin has described the scapegoat mechanism that is fundamental to white man’s sense of self to the question who am I? the white man answers: I am white, that is immaculate without stain. I am the purified, the saved, the saintly, the elect. It is the black who is the embodiment of evil – Let him, the son of the bond-women, pay the price of my sins. (36)

Gabriel resembles a white man, who in order to guard against the sin transforms the black man (John) into a “Devil’s Son”, into an incarnation of evil and dirt identified by his colour: He thinks, “He who is filthy, let him be filthy still” (*GTM* 20). To a young boy like John growing up in the Harlem ghetto, damnation is inevitable.

John’s aunt Florence has been brought to the evening prayer by her fear of death. Aunt’s arrival at church surprises John because she has never entered the church before. As her prayer begins, her reason for being there is revealed – she is dying. Florence comes before the altar of the church with a strong sense of guilt for having left her mother on the deathbed under the care of her wicked brother Gabriel. Memory takes her back to her youth in the South, to the indelible scene in a dark, barricaded house. Florence frustration is the double standard imposed on her after Gabriel’s birth. Her rebellion culminates in leaving home under her mother’s deathbed curse, to “go North, never to return” (*GTM* 74). In the North, she falls in love with and marries Frank with the hope of material comforts which she desperately desires. But their marriage turns out to be a disaster. She is totally unfit to bring to the marriage love, compassion and understanding that Frank needs. From the day Gabriel was born, she begins to despise him because he has stolen her birthright. Her hope for education and a few of the comforts of life have been 'swallowed up' as Elizabeth begins to shower her attention and resources on her son. Later the inevitable suffering from cancer and death torments her. Pratt says, “Bound fast in the desolate valley of hate she had never gains the strengths to climb the mountain and know the joys of love” (52). Married to a never-do-well person, Frank, she succeeds merely in outraging herself and driving him away. Finally

she bows to religious ecstasy. She is unable to achieve a life affirming love or her potential identity.

Baldwin's characters in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* show their inability to love or sustain mutual relationships. The failure of love is the root cause of John's despair. The failure of love in respect of human relationships has its complement in the failure of love with respect to man's relationship with God. It is the concept of God as vengeful and wrathful that lies at the root of John's mind, blocks him to establish meaningful personal relationships and to find sustenance for his life through the exhilarating power of love. It is this difficulty of shedding the fear and insecurity which leads to the adoption of one psychological prop or another that stands in the way of the individual's self-realization.

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